

A LATE-START TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE

4

Yuu Tanaka

Illustrator:
Nardack





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Laid-Back Life

Prologue

Despite being born only moments ago, Fau had already fit in with the rest of the group as though she'd always been one of us. Currently, she was perched atop my right shoulder, looking down at my status screen with me.

"Huh. Didn't realize there were so many," I muttered whilst scrolling through the list of event-related videos.

"Aye," Fau murmured in agreement. Since we had some time to spare, I figured we could watch a few clips together while waiting for the others to finish up their work.

"The village event can wait. Let's start with the Martial Arts Tournament."

"Aye?"

"You wouldn't know, since this took place before you were born, but we already saw more than our fair share of the village during the event. Don't worry. I'll show you what it's like later when we have more time."

"Yuh-aye."

For now, I was more interested in watching the Martial Arts Tournament.

"Whoa, pretty impressive stuff. Wait, is that a demon?"

From the looks of it, the participants of this event had fallen victim to a demonic invasion similar to what we experienced in Alf. The results were just as varied, with some servers suffering collateral damage on the one hand while others succeeded in vanquishing the demon. It looked like demons were our public enemy number one in LJO for the time being.

"Damn, is that even humanly possible?"

"Aye!" Fau flailed her arms and legs enthusiastically while watching the players fight one another, evidently mimicking their punches and kicks. *Bless you, child.*

"...Like, how do you even move like that?" I sighed at the video of the final match. I could barely keep up with the players' movements; the fight was over before I could fully process what had happened. Presumably, we had started playing around the same time, so how was it that they were so much stronger than me? Could I have become as competent as them if only I'd chosen a fighter class instead? Seeing these types of videos sort of made me wish I was one of the frontline

warriors too; I envisioned myself moving at lightning speed, using flashy arts and spells to mow down gargantuan foes.

“Nah... Couldn’t be me, even if I *were* a fighter.”

“Aye?” Fau furrowed her forehead in concern.

“Nothing, just ignore me,” I replied, patting her head to reassure her.

“Yuh-aye♪”

“There, there.”

“Aye!” Fau chirped, her face lighting up. She really was adorable. Although she looked like a living doll at first glance, her expression became incredibly animated whenever she smiled.

“Aight. Reckon the others should be done by now.”

My monsters were just about to wrap things up. Upon checking today’s harvest, I found that Bear Bear had already managed to collect some honey from their beehive. Moreover, its quality was superior to that sold in stores. I was sure Olto would be just as pleased as me to learn this, especially given how much he loved honey.

“By the way, Fau. What do *you* like to eat?”

“Aye?”

I imagined fairies enjoyed eating honey and fruit, but I wasn’t sure how accurate my assumptions were. *Let’s find out, shall we?* For starters, I laid out a jar of unprocessed honey, some fruits, and a few honey dumplings in front of Fau.

“Fancy any of these?” I asked.

“Aye...” Fau shook her head at the items spread out before her.

“Guess not, huh.”

On the contrary, she didn’t appear to have much of a sweet tooth.

“How ’bout these, then?”

“Aye.”

“No?”

She didn’t seem to like vegetable juice or nut cookies either.

“Hrm... These are all I have left.”

“Aye!”

“Wait, really?” I blinked as Fau made a beeline for the raw vegetables I’d pulled out as a last resort.

“Yuh-aye,” she chirped, munching on a carrot as tall as herself with great relish. Out of all the vegetables I had, she seemed to like blue carrots and amber pumpkins the most. It was obvious that she had a thing for crunchy foods, although any type of raw vegetable seemed to work in a pinch. I felt it would be best to make her veggie sticks from now on, since it was kind of ridiculous seeing a tiny fairy munch on a whole carrot. I was also relieved to know that I wouldn’t have to shell out a fortune for her meals.

“Aye.”

Once she was done eating, Fau brought her hands together and gave a little bow as if to thank me for the food. She then began plucking the strings on her lute, evidently in high spirits.

“La la la la...” she sang sweetly. Was she trying to convey how delectable her meal had been through music? As soothing as her voice was, I’d have to warn her against singing on the playing field for fear of attracting enemies. Next, I had her demonstrate her Alchemy skills. Unfortunately, her abilities were currently limited to fusing items. At the very least, she’d have to master the art of drying if she was to be of any use on the farm.

“Mm-mm!”

“Growl growl!”

Olto and the others sashayed over with a spring in their step, having put away their tools.

“...”

“Chirp chirp♪”

“Whoa, haven’t you guys danced enough already? Don’t tell me you’re gonna dance *again*?”

“Mmm♪”

“Growl♪”

I hadn’t realized my companions enjoyed dancing that much. Fau’s music had set them off into another frenzy, and they began stomping and swaying to the beat with gusto.

“Oh well, suit yourselves. We’re going out once you’re done there, okay?” I informed them. I was itching to see how Fau would fare in battle.

We finally set out an hour—*that’s right, one whole hour*—later. I resolved never to wait for my monsters to tire themselves out again: there seemed to be no end to their shenanigans, and their stamina knew no bounds. Perhaps dancing didn’t expend much energy, unlike farmwork or crafting tasks. In any case, I’d have to cut their boogie sessions short from now on—if not, I had a feeling they’d carry on dancing for as long as I let them.

“Time for a practice run,” I announced after arriving at the Eastern Plains. “All right, guys, let’s go! You can sit this one out, Fau.”
“Aye!”

I figured it was best to let Fau observe our battle first so she could understand how our party functioned. The village event had made all of us stronger, and as a result, our fight went smoothly. The fact that enemies in Zone One no longer posed a threat to us showed just how much we’d grown—or rather, how much *Sakura* and *Bear Bear* had grown, to be exact. Now that I had a good idea of our overall strength, it was time to put Fau’s abilities to the test.

“Think you can back us up with your singing, Fau?”

“Aye!”

Our test subject was a Rock Ant, which had the most solid defense out of all the enemies in the Eastern Plains. We couldn't have our opponent dying off too quickly, or else we wouldn't be able to evaluate Fau's potential.

“La la la...♪”



“Now, *that’s* what I’m talking about!”

As soon as the battle kicked off, Fau broke into song, bathing us all in blue light.

“Just as I thought. Looks like your performance has the same effect as bards’ music.”

What was more, her skill was fairly potent, enabling us to defeat our foe with far more ease than usual. The song she’d just played appeared to have a strengthening effect.

“Let’s do a couple more experiments. Keep up the good work, Fau.”

“Aye!”

In our next fight, Fau’s performance slowed down our opponent’s movements ever so slightly. Bard songs fell into two categories: buffs that aided the team and debuffs that worked against enemies. From what I could gather, Fau was capable of both. After several battles, I concluded that she was able to use two types of buffs—one that increased our overall attack power and one that strengthened our defense—as well as two types of debuffs that slowed down our adversary’s attack speed and accuracy respectively. It took a while to determine the last of those, however, as it was not immediately obvious what was happening at first. If I hadn’t noticed that our opponent was missing a few more shots than usual, her second debuff would probably have remained a mystery.

“Right, I’d like to test your Fire Summoning skill next. That okay with you?”

“Aye,” Fau replied in the affirmative, pumping her right fist. After a brief moment of concentration, a ball of fire materialized before her.

“Can you control this thing while singing?”

“La la la”

“You can, huh? Cool!”

She seemed to have no problems fighting with it either. Of course, in exchange for its low MP cost, the fire she summoned didn’t appear to be particularly powerful. At most, her fireballs were able to deplete around thirty percent of a Wild Dog’s HP. Regardless, her skill was good for long-range attacks, and I could see it coming in handy in many situations.

“Welcome to the team, Fau.”

“Aye.”

Chapter One: Adventuring with Fau

The day after taking Fau for a test-drive, I made a trip to the square for the first time since the event.

“Didn’t do much yesterday since Fau took up all my time.”

Today, I was determined to get stuff done. The first thing I wanted to do was visit Alyssa’s stall and sell some information. After that, it would be time to expand into new territory, namely Zone Three. My objective was to acquire more land for farming, as I had reached my limit in the Town of Beginnings. Now that our party had gained a capable new member, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to make headway.

“Look after the farm for us while we’re gone, will ya?”

“Mmm!”

Leaving the others in charge of farming, I set off with Fau, who provided us with music for our walk from her perch on my shoulder. Even though I had taken this path many times before, things felt fresh and exciting with Fau by my side, and I couldn’t help skipping now and then on my way to Alyssa’s stall.

“Hey. Long time no see,” she greeted me upon my arrival.

“Likewise. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“You’re in an awfully good mood today.”

Whoops. Had I been that obvious?

“Must be because of her,” I answered sheepishly, stroking Fau’s head with my finger. “This is Fau, by the way. She’s a pixie.”

“Got yourself a new tamed monster, eh? *And* another cute one at that.”

“Uh-huh. It’s not as if I’m doing it on purpose, though.”

I recalled Amelia saying something similar back in Alf. Did people think I was actively recruiting only cute monsters? I swear, it really *was* a coincidence—I wasn’t even trying.

“Any chance you’ll sell me the deets on that cutie?” Alyssa glanced at me hopefully.

“Of course. I’d be glad to.”

“Knew I could count on you, Yuto! That reminds me. Do you still have those attribute crystals? I can give you a good deal for them now if you wanna sell.”

“A good deal...? But you already offered to buy them for 30,000 G apiece last time.”

“I’m willing to bump up the price to 50,000 G.”

“Seriously? Fifty *thousand*? Are you saying the market value has gone up even *more*?”

“You got it.”

“Why, though?”

“A limited supply of attribute crystals went into circulation yesterday due to the event that just took place.”

Attribute crystals had indeed been one of the rewards you could get with the event points you earned. It was a well-known fact that they were worth a lot, so I wasn’t surprised that many players had exchanged their points for them. Still, I didn’t understand how that would hike up the market price.

“Wouldn’t the price *drop* instead if loads of them are on the market now...?”

After all, it meant that a formerly super rare item was now a mere rare item. However, things were apparently more complicated than I’d made them out to be.

“Thing is, the market influx has given the top blacksmiths free rein to experiment with attribute crystals. That wasn’t possible until recently, given that people who had been lucky enough to obtain them in the first place usually refused to part with them.”

I could understand that, as I was one of those players myself. There was no telling when a crystal like that might come in handy, so unless I was badly strapped for cash, I found it better to save them for special occasions.

“Anyway, people found out that attribute crystals grant extremely favorable effects when used on weapons and armor, which is why their value has skyrocketed. I’m sure front liners would do anything to get their hands on one.”

“Interesting. Didn’t know that.”

“In particular, monsters in Zones Four and Five tend to be susceptible to elemental damage. Simply having one powerful elemental weapon can be an absolute game changer.”

As a result, players were currently scrambling to obtain attribute crystals. It didn’t help that the front liners who were most desperate to get them were loaded, causing prices to soar at an alarming rate. Regardless, I had no desire to sell my crystals.

“I’ll pass. It’s not like I need money at the moment, and besides, I’d rather use them for my incubators.”

“Figured you’d say that. You *are* a Tamer, after all. Too bad. Shall we move on to the usual buying and selling of information then?”

“Sorry.”

“Nah, don’t be. I did ask for a lot. So, where’d you tame your new friend?”

“Actually, I didn’t—”

Before I could continue, Alyssa cut me off.

“Shh! Not so loud!” she hissed, beckoning me closer. Did she not want other people to overhear our conversation?

“Um, is this okay?”

“Yes, much better.”

“Where was I? Oh, right. You see, Fau was born from an egg,” I whispered. I then proceeded to explain how the egg had come to be as a result of Olto and Sakura breeding, how Fau had hatched from it, and how, for some inexplicable reason, Fau’s egg had hatched faster than Bear Bear’s. I also asked if I could buy some info on pixies if she knew anything, but unfortunately, Alyssa was just as stumped as I was.

“Sorry, this is my first time seeing one too. I got nothing.”

“I see...” I slumped my shoulders in disappointment. *Oh well. You win some, you lose some.* I decided to move on to the other details I was curious about.

“There are several pieces of information I’d like to buy.”

“Such as?”

“Info about Brewing, for starters. I wanna know its usability and what sort of tools are available. I’d also like to know where I can fish. Oh, and what the Fanged Forest is like too.”

“Gotcha...”

Alyssa obliged and gave me a brief rundown of each skill or location I had asked about, starting with the skill Brewing. She had a list of all the known items you could currently make with it, as well as tips on how to clear a special quest that allowed you to obtain a one-of-a-kind brewing barrel. For places where I could fish, she was willing to show me all the fishing spots up until Zone Four. She also offered to tell me what fish I could catch, but I declined, not wanting to ruin the element of surprise.

For the information about Zone Two, I asked her to be as specific as possible. In addition to a detailed map, she also had the nitty-gritty on the weaknesses of enemy monsters and the drop rates for each item. That was the Quick-Eared Cats for you: they always had the skinny on everything I wanted to know. Everything went without a hitch until it came to info on the Fanged Forest. For some reason, Alyssa instead showed me a map of the Humming Forest that was located at the end of the Eastern Plains.

“I won’t go too deep into it, but you’re better off going to the Eastern Town instead for things brewing-related.”

“And that’s because...?”

“Can’t tell you unless you pay. That being said, you don’t actually have a concrete destination in mind, do you? You just wanna make

progress, right?"

"Right."

"In that case, I recommend you check out the Eastern Town."

Well, I couldn't *not* go if Alyssa felt that strongly about it. As I had yet to conquer the Eastern Plains' boss, I guessed I'd need info on that too.

"Hmm. Okay, I'll go east."

"Good choice. I'd do the same if I were you."

"How much for everything? It's gotta cost quite a bit."

"Let's see. Brewing, fishing, field data, and boss data... That oughta be roughly 20,000 G altogether."

"Huh. That's cheaper than I thought, but..."

Nah. Better to think of it as a necessary expense. It was essential that I knew these details. Sensing my hesitation, Alyssa offered to make a trade with me after counting the number of players near her shop.

"How about we call it even if you sell me info about your pixie?"

"Huh? Are you saying that Fau's news is worth 20,000 G?"

All I had to offer was basic data on pixies; it wasn't as if I'd unearthed their habitat or fully figured out how their abilities worked. Furthermore, only Tamers could obtain pixies in the same way, and gnomes and tree nymphs were still incredibly rare species to my knowledge. And Alyssa was willing to fork out *20,000 G* for that?

"Oh yes, it's worth it," she said, grinning impishly at my expression. "I'm sure I can easily recover the initial cost if I sell the info to twenty people for, let's say, 1,000 G each."

One thousand G? Wasn't that too expensive? Still, if Alyssa was confident it would sell, she was probably right.

"Well, if you say so. I gladly accept."

"Consider it a done deal. Oh, before I forget, here's another tip for you. Apparently, eggs that your own monsters laid hatch faster."

"Ah, that's why. Thanks a bunch, Alyssa."

"See you around."

I could hardly believe my luck. Who knew Fau's information would be worth so much?

"Thanks to you, I learned a lot today!" I showered Fau with praise.

"Aye!"

In my excitement, I couldn't help skipping again, nearly shaking her off my head in the process.

"A-Aye?"

"Oops, sorry."

"Aye."

Thankfully, she didn't sound particularly angry about the jostling.
Phew.

“Thanks for waiting, everyone! Next, please. I’ve got some exciting news that’s hot off the press.”

I turned around at the sound of Alyssa’s voice and saw that a gaggle of players had gathered around her stall. The Quick-Eared Cats appeared to have a much larger clientele than I thought. *Whoops. Gotta make sure to keep an eye on the clock from now on.*

“Hmm, where to— Hold on, that a message?”

The sender of the message I had just received turned out to be Lewin, the blacksmith, who had written to let me know that the ax I’d requested a while back was ready. That was easy enough. I knew where I was headed next.

“The next shop we’re visiting is run by a scary-looking dude, but he’s not a bad guy, so don’t worry.”

“Aye!”

Together, we made our way to the Western Town Square, where Lewin’s Arms and Armor Shop was located.

“Hi there,” I greeted Lewin.

“Heya. Long time no see.”

“I got your text. You said my ax was ready?”

“Yep. Here it is.”

Name: Morning Dew Logging Ax

Rarity: 3 / Quality: 7★ / Durability: 250

Effect: To be used for logging.

Weight: 1

“Hey, this is dope! Looks really cool too!” I exclaimed. While it resembled an ordinary hatchet in most aspects, the blade glowed with a pale blue-green whenever it caught the light.

“Aye!”

“I used the water ores, green peach wood, and the Rock Ant shells and jaws ya gave me. Reckon I managed to keep it pretty lightweight without sacrificin’ durability.”

“Yeah, totally.”

“It ain’t got any special effects, but it oughta last ya a while.”

“Thanks so much. I love it. How much altogether?”

“That’ll be 3,000 G.”

“Really? That seems low.”

“Nah. I’d say it’s a fair price, considerin’ ya brought your own ingredients.”

I couldn’t wait to see what sort of wood I could obtain in the Humming Forest. After thanking Lewin for the ax, I returned to my farm and got started on concocting potions for my journey. Merely having a map wasn’t enough; I had to be well prepared if I wanted to

clear each area. *Thinking of, I feel like I should've brought this up a long time ago, but let's review the zones in LJO, shall we?*

The Town of Beginnings, which was the starting point in this game, was Zone Zero. LJO's numbering system was simple: the farther away the area from this one, the greater the number. Zone One was composed of the following four adjacent fields, i.e., the Northern Plains, Southern Forest, Eastern Plains, and Western Forest. Zone Two was two areas away from the Town of Beginnings and encompassed the Fanged Forest (located at the end of the Northern Plains), the Forest of Horns (located at the end of the Southern Forest), the Humming Forest (located at the end of the Eastern Plains), and the Forest of Talons (located at the end of the Western Forest). After Zone Two was Zone Three, which contained the Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western towns.

Beyond Zone Three, urban centers were found in odd-numbered areas, while even-numbered areas remained fairly rural—if the forums were to be trusted, that is. Apparently, you could travel to both of these types of areas from Zone Three, although it'd be some time before I got to that stage. Since I'd already defeated a Savage Dog, the Northern Plains' field boss, I could bypass the boss battle and go straight to the Fanged Forest. It would've been fairly easy to travel to the Northern Town in Zone Three via that route, but for reasons unknown to me, Alyssa had recommended the Humming Forest and Eastern Town instead.

“Uh-huh... I see. So *that's* why she wanted me to go east.” I nodded, checking the info she'd given me. Among the various tidbits I'd purchased was a memo about a highly skilled Brewer that resided in the Eastern Town. According to the note, I could acquire Brewing skills and a special barrel if I undertook a quest from them. That being said, I still had a long way to go. I had to defeat the boss of the Eastern Plains first, then brave the Humming Forest before I could arrive at my destination. However, I had faith in my current team's abilities.

“We're a full party now that Fau has joined us, not to mention we leveled up a ton during the event.”

With my water magic, Sakura's tree magic, and Fau's Fire Summoning, we were well equipped to fight ghost-type monsters too. As long as we had enough emergency recovery items, we ought to have no problem surviving Zone Two.

“Okay, that's it for potions. What else...? Right, better eat before we head out.”

Once I'd stored the potions I made in my inventory, I pulled out my cooking utensils to make juice for Olto and Bear Bear and cookies for Rick. This time, however, I decided to put a creative spin on their

food. I ended up making honey pear juice for Olto, honey persimmon juice for Bear Bear, and walnut, acorn, and soybean honey nut cookies for Rick. That reminded me—I had to prepare veggie sticks for Fau too. Admittedly, it was a little over-the-top, but I wouldn't be where I was without my beloved companions. Food for my monsters was one thing I refused to skimp on.

"We're leaving once you've eaten your fill, okay?"

"Mm-mm!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Growl!"

"Aye!"

Good, good. It looked like they were all enjoying their meals.

Two hours later, we were cruising through the Eastern Plains, already but one step away from the field boss fight. That wasn't surprising, given that we were able to defeat Zone One enemies with ease by now; it was as easy as button mashing our way through an old-school RPG, with not a single hit point lost between us. *So far, so good.* All that was left was to defeat the boss, and we'd soon be in Zone Two.

"We've got the full rundown on this guy, so it should be a breeze."

According to the Quick-Eared Cats' data, the field boss of the Eastern Plains was a Wrestler Rabbit. As the name suggested, it was a rabbit as buff as a pro wrestler. A "*rabbit*," *though*...? I couldn't help feeling incredulous once we were face-to-face with the monster.

"*Kshoh-shaww!*"

"Looks more like a bear to be honest... Misnomer much?"

The rabbit stood on its hind legs, paws raised menacingly. If it weren't for its long ears, I might've mistaken it for a polar bear.

"*Kshawww!*" the rabbit hissed once again. It clearly meant business.

"I'm counting on you, guys!"

"Mm!"

At Olto's signal, everyone scattered in different directions before attacking the monster, just as we had planned. While the Wrestler Rabbit was a fast and powerful foe, it only had two types of special attacks. Its defense was also on the low side, so as long as we understood its attack patterns, the chances of us winning the battle damage-free were pretty good.

What we *did* have to watch out for was its Stomping attack, which it started deploying once its HP had been reduced by half. Basically, the Wrestler Rabbit would jump high into the air and try to stomp us to death. The annoying part was that even if you managed to dodge it by a hair's breadth, its impact upon landing shook the ground and

impeded our actions. The best way of counteracting this move was to jump backwards, thereby avoiding both a direct hit and the stunning effect from the aftershock.

Obviously, Olto and Sakura had no problems dodging the attack. Even Bear Bear sidestepped it effortlessly, despite their heavysset build. Needless to say, Rick was a pro at evasion, and Fau, who was still relatively weak, was out of harm's reach, mostly playing a supporting role in the battle. Frankly speaking, *I* was the one who was in hot water.

Still, I only got hit once during the entire fight, and before long, the Wrestler Rabbit's HP was down to the last ten percent. Bosses really were something, though: one hit of its Stomping attack had been enough to deplete fifty percent of my HP.

"Almost there, tho— Wait, no way!"

Although Wrestler Rabbits were known as the weakest boss in the game, there was one more move we had to be careful of besides Stomping: Bunny Heaven, an attack it resorted to when all else failed. Not all specimens were capable of using this skill, and the odds of encountering one that could were one to thirty. Since you couldn't tell them apart based on appearance, there was no knowing if you'd encountered a Bunny Heaven user until you actually fought one— which turned out to be the case, as it happened. *Just our luck!*

"Quick, everyone! Get your defenses up!"

Bunny Heaven. As the name implied, this move was essentially a zerging strategy, intended to overwhelm players by summoning hordes of Rabbits. Given that they were, well, *Rabbits*, they didn't deal a whole lot of damage, and they disappeared as soon as they were done attacking. Nevertheless, the sheer number of them made it almost impossible to deflect every blow.

Bunbunbunbunbun!

Nearly forty Rabbits sprung up out of nowhere, kicking us unsparingly as they ran left and right across the field.

"Guh!"

Bunbunbunbunbun!

"Urk!"

The pesky little lagomorphs were able to get a few nasty hits in, but I managed to hold my ground. However, coupled with the boss's Stomping attack, only about thirty percent of my HP remained.

"Grooowl."

"Chirp..."

Crap! Were my monsters all right?!

"Everyone okay?"

"..."

"Mm."

Bear Bear seemed a little unsteady, but Olto and Sakura were as fit as a fiddle, thanks to their tough defenses. Rick also appeared relatively unruffled. Evidently, he had succeeded in evading the barrage of rabbit attacks. One problem remained, though: Fau was nowhere to be seen. That could only mean...

“Damn it, Fau’s dead!”

I should’ve seen that coming, considering she was still at level 4. And I’d intended to level her up once we’d arrived at the Humming Forest too. Who knew we’d be unlucky enough to run into a specimen with a measly 3.33% encounter rate?!

“You’ve done it now, Bugs!”

“Growl growl!”

“Chirp!”

“...!”

With a final relentless attack, the Wrestler Rabbit was finally completely zapped of its HP.

“Kshaw...shaw...” the Rabbit shrieked pitifully as it disintegrated.

“Phew. Anyway, back to the Town of Beginnings... Looks like the Humming Forest’ll have to wait until tomorrow.”

First things first, we had to retrieve Fau. After all, one of my goals was to strengthen her; there was no point if she wasn’t here. However, right after I turned on my heel, I received a notification.

Ding-dong.

“Your Job level has reached level 20. You may now progress to an advanced job class.”

“Whoa! Me, level 20?! Imagine that!”

I quickly opened my status window, barely able to contain my excitement. I mean, this was a *class change* we were talking about, which was pretty much one of the highlights of RPGs with job systems. Additionally, a job change was also a sign of maturity, reflecting that I’d progressed from newbie to a more intermediate player—although I reckoned most players who had been playing from launch day had long advanced to higher-level jobs by now.

“Looks like I can finally call myself a full-fledged LJO player!”

A list of available jobs popped up once I’d tapped the corresponding section on my screen. In addition to secondary jobs for Tamers, I also had the option of switching to a different basic class, such as a Farmer or Carpenter. In my case, I had no intention of changing professions, so I skipped straight to the section on Tamer-related jobs.

“Huh. Never seen that one before.”

The list included the following five options: Journeyman Tamer, Unique Tamer, Harvest Tamer, Elemental Tamer, and Commander Tamer. The first three I recognized and already knew about from the

forums. Journeyman Tamer was essentially the standard choice for Tamers and boosted your stats and skills evenly. The majority of players were likely to choose this option, given that it was the most well-rounded job.

Unique Tamer was exactly as the name implied and was a class change available to those who'd tamed more than three unique specimens. Not only did it increase your odds of encountering a unique monster, but it also granted significant bonuses to each unique specimen you'd already tamed. The downside was that it decreased the tame rate for regular specimens, not to mention they received fewer bonuses compared to Journeyman Tamers. In my opinion, it didn't seem very useful.

Harvest Tamer was a slightly special case and could only be selected if you had more than three monsters with Gather or Collect skills. Choosing this class would grant those monsters an overall stat boost as well as bonuses to the aforementioned skills. Unfortunately, it didn't sound like it'd improve your odds of survival on the battlefield.

Of course, I already knew about the job Commander Tamer, having unlocked it with a Tamers' book of secrets—an item that let you choose a special profession when switching jobs—which I'd obtained with my event points. While stat growth was slow, it came with the added perk of being able to bring an additional monster with you on your journeys. Since I was a lousy fighter anyway, I'd much rather have more monsters to back me up during battles.

Elemental Tamer was new to me, though. From what I could gather, this job granted elemental monsters extra bonuses. In that sense, its abilities were similar to those of Unique Tamers.

"Three elemental monsters—that must mean Olto, Sakura, and Fau."

If it hadn't been for the job Commander Tamer, I might have opted for this class change instead. However, my heart was set on the former; I hadn't spent three thousand points on that secret book for nothing.

"All right, let's go with Commander Tamer."

I then answered "Yes" to the question of whether I'd like to use the Tamers' book of secrets. Immediately, the book vanished from my inventory and appeared before me, the pages flapping as though being blown by a strong breeze. As the book reached its final page, my body glowed faintly. I waited for a bit, but nothing more happened.

"...That's it?"

All I did was glow for a split second. As I tensed up, the book of secrets disappeared into thin air without a trace. That really was it, then. It wasn't like this game to be so underwhelming, although I supposed the page-turning effect had been *kind of* dramatic.

Nevertheless, I had successfully transitioned from a normal Tamer to a Commander Tamer. *Huh. So much for that.* I decided to check my status to see what had changed.

“Guess my stats have gone up a tiny bit.”

All of my base stats had increased by one, except for my Intelligence and Sanity, which had increased by three. In addition, I had gained a new skill called Commander: Lvl. 1 (Tamed Monster Formation +1). The name was extremely fitting and drove home the fact that I was now a leader of sorts. I had also gained an extra Tame slot, thanks to my Command skill going up one level during the boss fight. *Sweet.* I was looking forward to taming more monsters in the near future.

Ding-dong!

“Huh? Again?”

“Your tamed monster, Rick, has reached level 20. Your monster is ready to evolve. Please choose a new evolution from your status menu.”

“N-No way! Everything’s happening all at once!”

Now that I recalled, Squirrels could evolve once their base level reached 20. Each monster evolved at a different rate depending on their species. For so-called grinding fodder like Squirrels and Rabbits, the evolution threshold was usually set at level 20. At the moment, Olto and Sakura were at level 19, and Bear Bear at level 17.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of information on their species, I had no idea when they’d be able to evolve. While gnomes had been ready for evolution at level 25 in beta, I wasn’t sure that rule applied to the official version as well.

“Rick! C’mere, buddy.”

“Chirp chirp!”

“You’re ready to evolve. I’m gonna need you to keep still for a few minutes.”

“Chirp!”

Rick saluted in reply as I opened his status window. At the very top was a list of possible evolutions.

“Hmm. I’ve heard of Pearl White Squirrels and Jet-Black Squirrels, but...what’s a ‘Wood Grain Squirrel’?”

Originally, I’d planned to evolve Rick into a Pearl White Squirrel since it would allow him to gain a water attribute. This new option gave me pause, though. There was a possibility that it would grant him plant-based abilities once he leveled up, and there was no doubt it was a rare evolved form. I could definitely use some extra tree-type skills on the farm.

“This must’ve popped up because I fulfilled some kinda special condition. Guess I’ll go with this last one, then. That okay with you, Rick?”

“Chirp chirp!”

Rick thrust his arms into the air, stretched out all the way to his fingertips. It looked like he had no objections.

“All right, Wood Grain Squirrel it is!”

“Chirp!”

The minute I made my selection, Rick began glowing. Man, this game sure loved to go ham on the glowy effects! This was more like it—much better than the lackluster treatment I had received earlier. After several seconds, the light subsided, and Rick stood before me, looking distinctly different.

“...Talk about a makeover.”

“Chirp?”

“You’re one size bigger, plus the pattern on your coat has changed.”

Previously, Rick had been gray all over, whereas his new coloring was similar to a chipmunk’s. He was mostly brown except for his white stomach, and unlike an ordinary chipmunk, the stripes on his back were arranged in a wood grain pattern. *So that’s where the name comes from*, I nodded to myself while loosening Rick’s bandana. As soon as I saw his new and improved stats, my eyes flew open.

“H-Holy shit! That’s some difference!”

I had severely underestimated the power of evolution. Evidently, even low-level monsters became noticeably stronger once they evolved. Rick’s HP and MP had increased by ten each, and his Agility had increased by four. Everything else had received a +2 boost.

Name: Rick / Race: Wood Grain Squirrel / Base Level: Lv. 20

Master: Yuto

HP: 61/61 / MP: 45/45

Strength: 10 / Endurance: 11 / Agility: 26

Dexterity: 14 / Intelligence: 11 / Sanity: 12

Skills: Vigilance (Advanced), Collect (Advanced),

Pruning, Jump, Climb, Flee, Cheek Pouch, Incisor

Attack, Conceal, Nut Bomb

Equipment: Crimson Bandana

His skills were slightly different too. Vigilance and Collect had presumably achieved advanced status, and he had also acquired two new skills called Conceal and Nut Bomb. *Nut Bomb, eh?* I had briefly read about that skill online before, and it had stuck with me ever since due to its unique effects.

As you could probably guess from its name, its effect was pretty straightforward—essentially, it allowed the user to throw nuts and use

them as weapons. The interesting part was that the attack's force and effectiveness differed depending on the type of nut used. To give a few examples, blue acorns dealt minor damage, while walnuts were capable of slight damage and provoking enemies. That was the extent of my knowledge, though. It looked like I'd have to do a bit of experimenting with this skill. Depending on its power and effect, it might be worth mass-producing specific nuts. However, the only nuts I had on me at the moment were blue acorns, walnuts, and glowing walnuts. As curious as I was, I didn't want to sacrifice something as precious as a glowing walnut for a mere test run.

"Isn't there anything else I can use? Nuts, nuts... Wait a minute, aren't nuts *fruits*? Think you can use this as a bomb, Rick?"

"Chirp!" Rick replied with a cheerful nod. Thankfully, fruits seemed to work just fine.

"That means you can use green peaches, white pears, and purple persimmons too. Well, I guess it'd be worth it if your attack is powerful..."

Still, I didn't want to waste too many fruits in the process. I made a mental note to check the forums later; I could always experiment afterwards if I couldn't find any relevant information.

"I'll give you three blue acorns and three walnuts for now."

"Chirp!"

Rick promptly stored the nuts I gave him using his Cheek Pouch skill. I knew this skill allowed him to store items in his mouth, but it honestly just looked like he was eating a bunch of food. *Don't accidentally swallow them, okay?*

Ding-dong.

"Whoa whoa whoa! Now what?"

The sound of yet another announcement instinctively put me on my guard, but this time, the message had nothing to do with us.

"One of the Elemental Gates has been unlocked. Consequently, we will award the first player to reach this gate the title 'The Elemental Gate Unlocker.'"

Unlike the previous notifications, this was a server-wide announcement. Apparently, someone had unlocked a so-called Elemental Gate. The name didn't ring a bell, but I assumed it was some sort of dungeon on the front lines. Given that I hadn't even reached Zone Three yet, this announcement had absolutely nothing to do with me.

"Elemental Gate, huh...? I smell adventure."

I bet it was a mysterious gate that led to the spirit world. As much as I longed to visit it, it'd undoubtedly be a while before I could.

"Oh well. Back to the Town of Beginnings for now."

After our successful victory over the Wrestler Rabbit, we finally crossed over into new territory—the Humming Forest in Zone Two—the following day.

“Not gonna lie, I was pretty worried at first, but we seem to be getting by no problem.”

“Growl growl!”

“Nice one! Keep it up, Bear Bear!”

“...!”

“You too, Sakura. Thanks for acting as a spearhead.”

Things were going swimmingly for us. My magic and Bear Bear’s claw attacks were now strong enough to wipe out weak mobs in a single blow, even taking monsters with higher HP values like Little Bears down to about forty percent health. Sakura and Olto’s defenses were impenetrable, and the backup Rick and Fau provided wasn’t too shabby either. I had doubts about Fau’s ability to coordinate with the others in dealing with higher-level enemies initially, but my worries proved to be unfounded. She was in no way inferior to Rick or Bear Bear, and she formed a seamless unit with Olto and Sakura, presumably because she was their child.

Rick had also become even more of a force to be reckoned with since evolving. He was far more agile and skilled at dodging attacks now, and his nut bombs proved to be a useful distraction. Using walnuts for the bombs had a provoking effect, but this wasn’t even strictly necessary, as blue acorn bombs more than sufficed at drawing our enemies’ attention. Rick was an excellent decoy, leading our opponent on a merry chase in every battle. Once he’d driven them into a corner, Bear Bear delivered the final blow. Though still imperfect, Rick was doing a great job acting as an evasion tank; consequently, the other members suffered less damage. He really was a reliable munchkin.

I’d also checked the forums while I was logged out and verified that fruits could be used as nut bombs too. So far, the following had been confirmed: green peaches provided a slight healing effect for team members, white pears were capable of minor damage and had a slight chance of causing paralysis, and purple persimmons dealt minor damage and had a slight chance of poisoning opponents. Seeing as the latter two only induced status ailments occasionally, using them as bombs seemed like a waste. Green peaches it was, then. Blue acorns were also pretty potent, so they’d probably be our main artillery for the time being. By evolving, Rick had suddenly become our ace. We’d have no problem winning fights now, so long as we weren’t outnumbered.

“Gotta say, I’m impressed at how fast you’re leveling up, Fau.”

“Aye!”

“Who’d have thought you’d already be at level 5?”

Since her base level had started out at 1, she was quick to progress.

“Learn any new skills?”

“Aye!”

In response, Fau burst into song.

“La di da da♪”

Hm? Was it me, or had the melody changed? She appeared to have learned a new tune, which sounded just a bit sassier than her previous songs.

“What effect does that have?” I asked.

“Aye!”

Fau raised her hands before swinging them down energetically. Gestures like this reminded me that she was indeed Olto’s child, although I guessed she had no choice but to rely on body language to convey her thoughts, given that most monsters couldn’t talk. Judging by her plucky expression and vigorous movements, she seemed to be mimicking an attack. Since it didn’t look like a close-range attack, she was probably casting some sort of spell.

“Hmm... Is that a magic attack, perhaps?”

“Aye♪”

Evidently, I had nailed it on my first guess. *Now that’s growth—we love to see it!* So her new song had the ability to strengthen magic attacks. That was incredibly useful.

“Wow, Fau. I’m impressed,” I gushed, patting her on the head.

“Aye!” she chirped from her perch on my shoulder. Seeing our exchange, my remaining companions hurled themselves at me.

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

“...♪”

They then formed a neat line in front of me, Olto leading the group with his head bent forward as though in a bow—though it was most likely pats he was after.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I chuckled, patting my monsters in turn.

“Mmm.”

After walking through the Humming Forest for ten minutes or so, we made it safely to the safety zone that we’d previously had trouble reaching.

“We’ve been slogging nonstop ever since we left the Eastern Plains. Let’s take a short break here, okay?”

“Mm!”

To tell the truth, I had just realized that I’d ignored the progress report the devs sent us the day before. I seemed to have gotten the

notification during a fight, which was why I'd missed it. *Might as well check it now while we're resting.*

"Hmm. Looks like I still have way more titles than anyone else."

I was the top title holder as usual with six titles under my belt—double that of the second-place player with their three. As most people seemed to know that I had at least four titles, it didn't take a genius to figure out that I was the current record holder. I supposed I would just have to put on a smile if someone decided to give me a hard time. I was basically a pro at that at this point, thanks to my years of experience in dealing with obnoxious customers!

"...Let's not think about real-world problems in-game," I sighed. It wouldn't do to dampen the mood. "Huh. Interesting to see which skills people have chosen to acquire too."

There seemed to be a lot more players with Taming and Cooking skills since the last time I'd looked. I was especially thrilled to see the increase in Tame-users; the fact that more people were choosing to obtain Taming skills regardless of their job class meant that Tamers were starting to be seen in a more favorable light.

"Who knows? This could actually be the beginning of a new era."

That being said, I'd always believed this day would come, thanks to famous players like Amimin! Additionally, the player with the most tamed monsters had a walloping *fourteen* beasts, which was nearly three times what I had. *Damn, talk about impressive.* It was no wonder Tamers were getting a better rep.

"Hey, check that out. There are more than two hundred players with Plant Knowledge now. Good to see it gaining traction."

Given the number of skill users, it'd only be a matter of time before herbal tea leaves became widely available. At last, it looked like I would soon be free from the fiascos surrounding my farm stand. In addition to the report, there was also a new message from the devs. The message read, "*New system features have been unlocked following our first two major events.*" New features, eh? Hadn't there been an announcement like that before? If I remembered correctly, the last update had unlocked a wider variety of enemy monsters. What new features awaited us this time? Oh well, there was no point thinking about it now; I was bound to find out sooner or later anyway. *Better get going,* I decided.

"Time to go, guys."

However, none of my monsters responded to my call. They seemed to be huddled in a circle, playing some sort of game together. Upon closer look, I saw that they were engaged in a game of stick toppling—a game which involved taking turns to see who would be the one to knock over a stick pushed into a pile of sand—which was slowly becoming a household favorite. I had to say, they really took

the mantra “play hard” seriously. They were so focused they hadn’t heard me at all, although I supposed part of it had to do with Fau’s music drowning out my voice. Each time the mound of sand got smaller, she played a low and menacing tune reminiscent of the theme song to that infamous shark movie, the one that went *Duunnn dunnn, duuuunnnn duun*. They were almost done anyway, so I decided to wait for them to finish.

“Hey, I see the village.”

After leaving the safety zone, we arrived at the village in Zone Two. To be honest, it wasn’t much of a village, the only buildings being an inn, a tool shop, and a smithy. There were no houses in sight, and the only NPCs were those working at the aforementioned stores. On the whole, the place felt pretty lifeless. Nevertheless, I was grateful for simply having somewhere to rest. I stopped by the tool shop, hoping to make some lucky finds—herb seeds would’ve been nice—but to my disappointment, they didn’t have anything of interest.

“There aren’t any stalls either. Guess it’s pretty much just a safety zone with a few extras on the side.”

Having nothing else to do, I was about to leave the village and continue on my way, when I heard a familiar voice.

“Huh? Silver-Haired! Fancy seeing you here!”

“Hi!”

“Oh, it’s you guys. Hey, Tsuyoshi, Takayuki.”

The players were none other than Tsuyoshi, the red-haired Swordfighter, and Takayuki, the Lancer with the blue center part, whom I’d helped in the underground passage connecting to the Dryad’s altar a while back. I remembered them well, as it was rare for me to do the rescuing rather than be rescued.

“Are you headed for the Eastern Town?” Takayuki asked.

“Yeah, I am. How about you?”

“We’re gathering ingredients in Zone Two since we heard there are a lot of insect-type monsters in the Humming Forest,” Takayuki continued.

“Yeah, they’re perfect for making lightweight armor,” Tsuyoshi added.

From the looks of it, they both seemed to be light infantry, whose main purpose was to evade attacks. I could see why they would want to obtain lighter equipment.

“Is it still just the two of you?”

“No, we’re with our classmates now. We’re not strong enough to survive Zone Two on our own yet.”

“They’ve actually progressed until Zone Four, but they were super chill about helping us with our grinding quest.”

As we were chatting, we were joined by a few other players whom I took to be their friends.

“Hey, you two. Do you know this guy?” one of them asked.

“Yep. He helped us a ton a while back!” Tsuyoshi grinned.

“Come on, don’t exaggerate. It was just that one time.” I scoffed.

“Anyway, we learned a lot from you.” Takayuki beamed. It was just like high school students to be so honest and sincere. Frankly, their youthful innocence was making me feel old.

“These are our party members,” Tsuyoshi said, pointing at his classmates.

“Hi, I’m Hinako.”

“I’m Cerulean.”

“And I’m Ivan.”

Each member bowed as they introduced themselves, equally polite and fresh-faced as the two boys. They must have been enrolled in some prestigious private academy to have such good manners (*or so I’d have to imagine*).

“I’m Yuto, a Tamer,” I offered in reply.

“Oh my gosh, really...? U-Um, could you give us a second?” Hinako stuttered.

“Huh? Sure, I guess.”

Upon hearing my name, Tsuyoshi and Takayuki’s classmates gathered around them and started whispering in hushed tones.

“...Why...?”

“...You should’ve...”

“...Where...?”

Had I said something wrong? Although I could only catch a few words here and there, it was evident that they were interrogating the boys.

Three minutes later...

“Th-Thanks for waiting.”

“Sorry for going off like that.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Is there something I should know about, though?”

“Oh no, not at all! Don’t worry about it!”

“We were just lectur— I mean, *confirming* something with those two.”

Hinako and Cerulean, the two girls in the group, laughed nervously as if to dodge my question. Tsuyoshi and Takayuki stood a few paces behind them, looking strangely crestfallen as Ivan patted their shoulders consolingly.

“You *sure* you’re okay?” I pressed.

“Y-Yeah! Nothing to worry about!”

“Don’t mind us!”

Oh well. Must be some kind of in-joke between them. Reminds me of

my own high school days.

“Anyway, I wanted to ask... *You’re Silver-Haired, right?*” Hinako said, glancing at me hopefully.

“I saw your monsters in one of the videos.”

So they knew who I was.

“Well, some people do call me by that name.” I shrugged.

“Eek! I knew it!”

“Can’t believe we get to meet you here!”

The girls squealed excitedly, eyes fixated on my monsters. Hinako seemed to be a fan of Rick and Cerulean of Sakura. What was that about a video, though?

“What video?”

At first, I was concerned someone might have been filming us in secret, but apparently that wasn’t the case. Instead, I was shocked to learn that we had made an appearance in an official video. Come to think of it, I had only watched videos of the Martial Arts Tournament, and none of the crafting event I had participated in. Honestly I had yet to even finish watching all of the tournament clips, given that there were over a hundred of them, including those uploaded by players themselves. I would have to check out the footage of the Village Archdemon event sometime soon. While I checked the official website, Ivan struck up a conversation with me. Despite being dressed like a Mage, his job turned out to be something else entirely, much to my surprise.

“Um, I’m actually a Tamer too,” he confessed.

“Huh? Really?”

Who would’ve guessed I would run into another Tamer here?

“Where are your monsters then?”

“Since I formed a party with Takayuki and the others, I only brought this guy here with me. Say hi, Snake.”

“Sssss.”

A giant snake hissed and poked its head out of Ivan’s robes. I reckoned it had to be at least two meters in length. Its sheer size made me nervous to touch it, even though I knew it was his tamed monster. The enormous snake brought its face close to Fau and Rick on my shoulder, flicking its tongue lazily. I knew it meant no harm and was just saying hello—even Fau was smiling—but still, I couldn’t help feeling uneasy. Judging from its appearance, it had to be a Snake—one of the monsters that spawned in this area.

“I’m guessing that’s an evolved Snake then?”

“That’s right. He evolved into a Viper at level 20.”

“Hmm. Be pretty cool to have a monster like this.”

As intimidating as it was, it felt kind of reassuring to have it as an ally.

“He’s pretty strong, you know? Not just as a damage dealer, but as a covert operator too. He can even move in the water.”

“Wow. He sounds real useful.”

The two of us eagerly exchanged information about our monsters. It was always nice to chat with other Tamers, as they were often able to provide me with valuable insight. Determined to keep my Tamer friends close by, I made sure to exchange friend codes with Ivan before parting ways.

I was also surprised to receive a message from Alyssa; it was unusual for her to get in touch with me first. The message turned out to be an exclusive newsletter of sorts aimed at her premium customers, notifying them of some highly useful information she had obtained about yesterday’s so-called “Elemental Gate.” She signed off by urging us to come by her place if interested—the sooner, the better. While I felt honored to be considered one of her regulars, my hands were currently tied. I was interested in what she had to offer, though, so I made a mental note to visit her when I returned to the Town of Beginnings.

“Gotta conquer Zone Two first, though.”

Ivan and the gang had already left to go hunting. It was time for us to make a move as well.

“Let’s go, gu— Oh, come *on*.”

It looked like I’d have to wait until one of them destroyed the mound and knocked the stick over.

One hour had passed since we’d left the village. As it so happened, I was currently en route to a certain location marked on my map.

“Almost there,” I muttered, scrutinizing my map data.

Though most areas in Zone Two had been cleared by now, one thing continued to elude players: namely, the mysterious objects located in the four cardinal directions. For example, the Forest of Talons had an enormous boulder with a hole in it that whistled whenever a breeze blew through, and the Forest of Horns had a giant lit torch as tall as a tree, which never went out no matter what you did. Rumor had it that the Fanged Forest was home to six stone slabs, each about three meters in height and placed in a circle like a miniature Stonehenge. As for the Humming Forest, where we currently were, there was said to be a deep and beautiful spring surrounded by dozens of colorful flowers.

In the beginning, many players had visited this location in an attempt to solve whatever mystery it held. Some brought items, thinking that you needed to make some kind of offering, while others hurled magic attacks and spells at it. Unfortunately, none of them ever got any result, and the fountain remained as much of an enigma as

ever. Eventually, people came to assume that it was simply part of the general fantasy landscape. Alyssa was convinced there was something more to it, but her experimenting had proved fruitless. I wasn't sure why, but she'd strongly recommended I visit it before I left. *I promise you won't regret it, so just go*, she'd insisted. It had to be a worthwhile trip if she said so—this was Alyssa, after all.

Of course, going to the fountain meant we'd have to make a huge detour. Still, we were able to withstand a bit more damage now, and I was keen to find out what this unusual scenery looked like. After weighing the pros and cons, I made up my mind to stop by the mysterious spring on our way to the Eastern Town. As we marched through the Humming Forest, we eventually entered a small clearing.

“Found it. That must be it.”

It was exactly as I'd been told. There was a circular clearing about ten meters wide, with a beautiful fountain surrounded by flowers in the middle.

“I see what Alyssa meant... Definitely doesn't seem like just part of the scenery. It feels kinda spiritual, the kind of place where there's more to it than meets the eye. Make sure to watch out for clues, everyone.”

At my command, my companions sped off towards the spring.

“Mm-mm?”

“Chirp?”

“Aye?”

Olto, Rick, and Fau peered into the fountain, dipping their fingers tentatively in the water.



“Growl?”

“...?”

Bear Bear and Sakura walked along the perimeter to see if there was anything unusual. I decided to follow suit.

“Hrmm...”

I circled the fountain once, but there didn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary.

I did find a daffodil flower and bulb, both of which were categorized as weeds, so my search hadn’t been entirely for naught. However, I was still nowhere close to solving the mystery of the fountain.

“Should I try fishing?” I wondered, standing at the water’s edge. Just then...

“Huh? What’s going on?”

The fountain suddenly began to glow. At first, I thought it was just the sunlight reflecting off the surface, but it soon became obvious that light was coming from the water itself. *What the—?! Alyssa hadn’t mentioned anything like this in the information I purchased from her!* Amidst my shock and bewilderment, a voice rang out, asking me the following question.

“Would you like to offer a water crystal to the Water Elemental’s Altar?”

Offer a water crystal? Water Elemental’s Altar? Was it referring to this place? Heck, what did that mean?

“...Offering means I’ll lose my crystal, right?”

Water crystal, eh? I wouldn’t have minded sacrificing something else, but a *water crystal*? That was way too valuable. Not only could they be used to craft incubators, but they also fetched 50,000 G *apiece* on the market. Why would I sacrifice that to some weird, unknown place or entity? Still, there was a reason I wasn’t fully opposed to the idea.

“They did say ‘Water Elemental’s Altar,’ right? Doesn’t your equipment say something like ‘Earth Spirit,’ Olto?”

Could there be a correlation between the two? If gnomes were considered “earth spirits,” then would a “water spirit,” or in this case, water elemental, be an Undine, perhaps? Though my crystal was worth 50,000 G, there was no doubt this was a special event.

“Ugh, decisions... No telling what might happen if I pass up on this opportunity, though...”

There was also the Dryad’s altar in the Town of Beginnings to consider. In order to meet the Dryad, players had to visit the altar on Tree Day, aka Thursday in the real world. By that logic, the Water Elemental’s altar had to appear on Water Day, i.e., Wednesday. As it

happened, today's in-game date was Water Day on January 18th. If bringing a water crystal on Water Day was indeed the trigger for this event, ignoring this opportunity would mean I'd have to wait a whole week before I could try again—theoretically speaking, anyway. Honestly, it was just as likely that I'd fulfilled an entirely different requirement by pure chance. The pop-up window was still open, silently prompting me to make my decision. No one had uncovered the secrets of this fountain yet, which made the offer all the more enticing.

“Well...might as well give it a go.”

Although water crystals were scarce and hard to come by, my curiosity won out in the end. After all, there was no guarantee I would trigger the same event the next time I visited.

“Okay, I'll do it!” I replied, pressing the “Yes” button with finality.

“Very well. Please throw your water crystal into the fountain.”

I took out my crystal and tossed it in the water as instructed. Immediately, a blinding ray of light shot out from the spring and rose to the heavens.

“Now *that's* flashy as hell!”

I'd seen the devs abuse glowy effects countless times, but this was by far the most dramatic rendition to date! Did this mean a water spirit was about to descend? Instead of a deity, however, an enormous closed gate materialized before my eyes. The gate was made out of stone, like the entrance to some ancient ruin. Intricate, wavy patterns were inscribed on the surface, making it look all the more otherworldly. In terms of size, it had to be at least five meters tall.

“Uh, um...” I faltered, stunned by the sudden appearance of this monstrosity. The sight of the closed doors made me anxious at first, but they soon began to slide open with a groan. *Thank goodness*, I thought. There was no way I could have moved them on my own. The next instant, a server-wide announcement echoed across the field.

“One of the Elemental Gates has been unlocked.”

“As a bonus for unlocking the Water Elemental Gate, you will be awarded a random skill scroll.”

So *this* was one of the rumored Elemental Gates! The gates had also come up in the announcement the day before, which meant I was probably the second player to unlock one. Yesterday had been Fire Day, aka Tuesday. If the crystals' attributes were indeed correlated with the days of the week as I suspected, that would mean the Fire Elemental Gate had been unlocked. Based on that logic, the Earth Elemental Gate would be accessible on Earth Day, i.e., Saturday. What about the *Air* Elemental Gate, though...? None of the days corresponded to *that* element, although it would have to be one of the remaining options: Moon Day (Monday), Tree Day (Thursday), Gold

Day (Friday), or Sun Day (Sunday)... *Eh, beats me.*

“Oh yeah, they also mentioned something about a skill scroll.”

I checked my inventory, and sure enough, I'd received a gift box, which would presumably grant me a random skill scroll once opened.

“All right, let's see what's inside!”

I was happy to receive a new skill for free, regardless of what it contained. Even better if it was something I could actually use, of course!

“What's it gonna be, what's it gonna be? Da da da daaa da da da da daaa!” I sang as I opened my gift, feeling victorious. The contents turned out to be a Water Exploration skill.

“Huh. No idea what that is.”

Considering the sheer ridiculous number of skills in this game, I hadn't bothered to remember the ones I wasn't interested in.

“Eh, might as well use it.”

I unrolled the parchment while simultaneously thinking the word “use.” The scroll emitted a faint glow before vanishing completely, indicating that I had successfully acquired the skill. I immediately jumped to the description in my status window.

“Uh-huh, I see. Seems like an interesting skill.”

Water Exploration allowed you to scan objects in the water by sending magic in short bursts of ultrasonic sound and reflecting them back to you in the form of an echo, like a sonar. The results of the scan appeared visually on my screen as a 3D map. Leveling up would also improve the skill's accuracy and extend its range. As interesting as it was, I couldn't picture myself using it that often. It was probably a must-have for species that thrived in water, though, like sea nymphs.

“Guess I should head inside... Looks kinda creepy, though.”

I couldn't see what was beyond the gate—not because it was too dark, but rather because of the wavering blue light, which gave the impression that we were going underwater. Still, scared or not, I wasn't about to back down now.

“Aight, let's go, guys!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Groooowl!”

“...♪”

“Aye!”

Rick, Bear Bear, and Olto pumped their right fists while Sakura flashed her usual serene smile. Fau began playing some music for dramatic effect. The melody reminded me of the *Buccaneers of the Caribbean* theme song, evoking a sense that we were about to embark on an epic journey.

As a way of testing the waters—no pun intended—I tried poking at the blue light. A ripple ran across the translucent border spanning the gate. Given that this was the Water Elemental Gate, perhaps it really *was* made out of water. I didn't want to drown upon entering, though... Steeling myself, I plunged my arm all the way in. It really felt like I'd submerged it in water.

"Whoa. Feels kinda cold..." I shuddered at the sensation. Curiously, my arm remained dry.

"Gah, time to be a man! Think coursing river!"

Mustering up my courage, I threw myself into the blue light. For a split second, I felt as though I were immersed in some sort of liquid. The next instant, I was in uncharted territory.

Chapter Two: The Water Elemental Gate

“Am I inside...a building?”

I seemed to be in a spacious hall, perhaps some sort of stone temple. Strange incandescent spheres hovered in the four dimly lit corners, illuminating the room with a mystical blue light.

“Mm-mm!”

“...?”

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

“Aye aye!”

My monsters yelped as they tumbled in on top of one another. Evidently, they had all charged into the gate at the same time.

“You okay, bud?”

“Mm.”

Olto, who was smooshed at the bottom of the pile, raised his hand and grinned at me. He seemed to be perfectly fine.

“Now then, what—”

“Greetings, Unlocker of the Gate.”

“Huh? Who said that?”

“I am the leader of the Undines. We welcome you and your brethren wholeheartedly.”

A stunning woman with wavy, turquoise-blue hair tied back in a ponytail materialized before me. She was dressed in a light and gauzy dress reminiscent of a dancer’s outfit, which reminded me of a certain Dryad’s attire, only in blue instead of green.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“This is the secret dwelling place of the Undines. Given the sacredness of our village, only those deemed worthy are permitted to travel here.”

“I see. So that’s why it’s called the Water Elemental Gate.”

“This way, please. Allow me to show you around.”

“Uh, sure. Thanks.”

My monsters and I hurried after the Undine Chief, who had already started walking off briskly. We followed her down the narrow hallway that led away from the room we’d entered, and were greeted by a breathtaking sight. No longer were we in a dim, cobblestoned dungeon; instead, we found ourselves in some sort of fountain plaza,

the likes of which you might find in Europe. The townscape was rather peculiar, with the walls, ceiling, and floor all made out of white marble. That's right: *there was a ceiling*. The town was in essence contained inside some type of gigantic stadium, albeit one far larger than Tokyo Dome. There appeared to be waterfalls and canals everywhere I looked—on the walls and ceiling, in the streets, even on the staircases and skyways, providing a never-ending stream of water. Everything about this screamed that it was a water spirits' hideout. Best of all, the town was teeming with countless beautiful girls, all of whom resembled the Undine Chief. Most were chatting casually with one another, while others busied themselves at stalls.

"This is the town of the Water Elementals. Any human that makes it past the gate is granted unrestricted access within our city," the chief informed me.

"Th-Thank you," I stammered, awed by the grandeur of it all. I couldn't wait to explore this intriguing place. Before that, though, there were a few things I needed to confirm.

"Excuse me. Can I ask you a few questions?"

"Go ahead, child. I shall try to answer them to the best of my ability."

"Thank you, that'd be great. Um, let's see. If I wanted to come here again, would I have to offer another water crystal on Water Day?"

"Not at all. You are only required to match the attribute of your crystal with the day of the week the first time you enter. After that, you are free to enter the gate anytime."

That was extremely valuable information. My theory had been correct then: you *had* to offer a water crystal on Water Day.

"Can I bring other people with me?" I continued.

"No. Only those who are qualified may enter. Those who do not possess the right of entry will likely be repelled by the gate."

Bringing other people was a no-no then. However, considering that my monsters had been able to follow me, only players needed to fulfill the gate's requirements.

"Oh, another thing. What's that gate over there? It's huge."

On the other side of town was a massive gate, visible even from a distance. It was painfully obvious that it held some sort of significance.

"Beyond that gate is where the Water Elementals' trial is held. That is where our poor, deranged brethren are sealed away."

"Does that mean we'll encounter Undines as enemy monsters?"

"Indeed. Perhaps the term 'dungeon' would be more familiar to you."

"Will you get mad if I defeat the elementals who have gone

berserk?”

“Not at all. If anything, vanquishing them would be an act of mercy. It would be best if we could return them to their former selves, but alas...”

Thankfully, there seemed to be no issues with defeating enemy Undines. Hmm, was there anything else I wanted to ask? I felt like I’d gotten all the information I needed already, but...

“Oh, one more thing. I see fish over there, but do you allow fishing here?”

“Absolutely. Feel free to do so.”

These were fish native to the Undines’ habitat. Who knew what interesting species I could catch? The mere thought of it excited me.

“I shall be returning to the gate now if you have no further questions. Feel free to call me anytime if you need anything.”

“Got it. Thank you for explaining everything so thoroughly.”

The Undine Chief bowed before walking away.

“All right! Let’s go exploring!”

“Mmm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl!”

“Hey, be careful! You might trip!”

The whole town was unbelievably ethereal. Everything was made out of white and blue marble, and the water flowing every which way was like music to my ears, like the melody of a babbling brook. When I say there was water everywhere, I mean *everywhere*. Here, numerous narrow canals ran down the middle of the road, waterfalls gushed on both sides of staircases, and the giant fountain in the square drew a magnificent rainbow arch. Paired with the blue-haired Undine girls all over town, it was truly a romantic sight to behold.

“Now *this* is what you call a fantasy world.”

Gosh, I was stoked!

“Let’s check out the shops first.”

“...♪”

“Aye!”

I decided to start off by seeing what the nearest stalls had to offer.

“Guess this one’s a weapon shop.”

“Welcome to the Undines’ Weaponry Shop,” the shop owner greeted me. The stall offered a variety of water-themed armaments, all of which had fairly decent specs. Unfortunately, most of them were far too heavy for me to equip. That being said, there were two items that caught my eye, which I did end up purchasing:

Name: Angler’s Boots

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 5★ / Durability: 220

Effect: Defense +11, minor boost to Fishing.
Requirement: Possesses Fishing skills.
Weight: 1

These shoes granted you extra bonuses while fishing and strengthened your defenses. The 8,000 G price was well within my budget, and these would no doubt be an indispensable piece of equipment in my future fishing endeavors. The other item I purchased was the Water Elemental's Ice Ax.

Name: Water Elemental's Ice Ax
Rarity: 4 / Quality: 6★ / Durability: 400
Effect: Specialized for mining. Grants bonuses to underwater mining activities.
Weight: 1

The item's effects provided an interesting revelation, essentially confirming that mining nodes existed underwater. My new ice ax would allow me to stand in for Olto if need be, as I doubted he was capable of spending prolonged periods submerged. Anyway, I'd been thinking for a while now that it was about time I started mining for items myself. As skills like this needed to be honed over time, it was best to obtain them as early as possible. I promptly learned the skill Mining in order to wield my new tool, resolving to go spelunking more often from now on.

Next I visited a grocer's stall that sold all kinds of fish, much to my delight. Some of the fish on display were ones that I'd caught before, such as begini trout, begini dace, and begini crucian carp. However, I was far more drawn to the begini eels, begini shrimp, and begini basket clams in the display case. Was it possible to catch them here? I vowed to try and fish for them later; if things didn't pan out, I could always return to the store and buy them then. At any rate, I hoped to catch an eel or two myself, given that they cost 2,000 G each.

After departing the grocery, I stopped by a tool shop, which appeared to have a wide selection of fishing supplies.

"Wow! This is great," I gushed. All of the items were noticeably better than the ones in the beginner's tackle kit I was currently using. I was especially impressed by the Water Elemental's Fishing Rod, Water Elemental's Creel, Water Elemental's Lobster Pot, and Water Elemental's Lure.

"...They look really badass too."

Something about the peculiar bluish-white material they were made with spoke to my inner nerd.

“Well, I *am* planning on fishing more often...” I muttered, unable to resist the temptation. It didn’t seem like a bad deal if I considered it an investment—or so I convinced myself.

“...Okay, I’ve made up my mind. I’ll buy them.”

Altogether, the fishing rod, creel, lobster pot, and two lures cost me 34,000 G. *Not to worry*, I thought. My taste buds would surely be singing in no time from all the delicious fish I was about to catch, and my purchase would be totally worth it. *Fingers crossed.*

“Mmm.”

Oh, come on, Olto, don’t give me that look. I’ll admit I did get a bit carried away.

“All right, time to check out the next shop.”

“Mm...”

I carried on with my tour of the plaza, ignoring Olto’s blatant sighs. The next shop was a general store that sold numerous intriguing knickknacks, such as a water ore drinking glass with a cooling effect. There was one item, however, that particularly caught my interest.

“Aquatic plant seeds? What are these? Think you can grow them on our farm, Olto?”

“Mm-mm.”

“Guess not, huh. Is it due to a lack of equipment or skills?”

“Mmm.”

Apparently, it was both. It was a shame I couldn’t buy them now, as they’d only go to waste. I decided to come back and buy them once I’d figured out how to properly care for them.

Next, we came across a pharmacy. While they predictably sold potions of all sorts, I also found an item called a Water Breathing Tablet in the mix. The candy-shaped tablet allowed you to breathe underwater for as long as you had it in your mouth. As fascinating as that sounded, it wasn’t exactly affordable; even the cheapest option, which granted you water breathing abilities for thirty minutes, cost 2,000 G. Still, perhaps it would be good to have one in case of an emergency, as there was no telling when I might drown by accident. By pairing it with my Aqua Lung skill, I could potentially stay underwater for quite some time. Taking all that into account, I made up my mind to buy one. After all, it wasn’t something you encountered every day. Next to the pharmacy was a cafeteria.

“Oh, cool.”

It looked like they even had a takeout menu. Their offerings included simple dishes that I could make, such as grilled fish and simmered fish, along with fancier fare like acqua pazzza and bouillabaisse. I couldn’t wait to try my hand at them once I got back.

“Man, they sure look good...” I gulped, swallowing my saliva. Photos I could’ve dealt with, but real food? *Hell no.* I was utterly

powerless before the array of dishes in front of me, the very sight and smell tantalizing to the senses. *Crap, I can't take it anymore!*

"...Ahem. One grilled begini sweetfish, please."

"Roger! One grilled sweetfish, coming right up!"

Forgive me! I couldn't resist! I had zero regrets, though—the taste was absolutely fantastic! Its meat was soft and flaky, subtly sweet, and perfectly salted. *Ah, what bliss.*

"Definitely gonna recreate this later. Should be a cinch to make."

The next stall appeared to be the last.

"...What kind of shop is this?"

Though clean and well lit, the place was sparse. Where there should have been items, there was only a counter and some chairs. I felt as though I were at a municipal office or real estate agency.

"Excuse me. What do you sell here?" I asked the shopkeeper.

"Welcome! Our store is home to many household objects."

"Household objects? Didn't know you could buy them here."

Household objects referred to items you could use or display in your home, ranging from basic necessities such as shelves and tables to works of art like sculptures and wall decor. Normally, you would have to buy a home to display said items, but fortunately for me, I owned a farm. Since some items were made to be installed on farms instead of houses, I figured it was worth having a look.

"Uh-huh... I see."

There were four household objects I could set up on my farm. One was a sprinkler that would water my crops automatically for me. There was also a well, which I could place anywhere on my farm, as well as a hydroponic pool and a purification fountain that spurted water nonstop. They each sounded intriguing, and I would've liked to have bought them all if possible. However, I decided against the sprinkler and the well for now, given that I had no immediate need for them. I had assumed the hydroponic pool would allow me to grow aquatic plants, but apparently the process was a bit more complex than I thought.

"Huh? You mean, the pool's not enough? Does it have to do with your not having the proper skills?"

"Mm."

"Gotcha..."

Even Olto seemed to be lacking the necessary skills to use the pool. I quickly skimmed my list of obtainable skills, but none of them seemed to fit the bill, which meant the one I needed probably wasn't part of the starting skill pool. It could very well be something that I could only acquire by raising my Farming level.

The purification fountain especially blew my mind; it was capable of producing an astounding *fifty* units of purified water every day.

Other than using it for concocting things, the water from the fountain could also be used to improve the quality of your crops.

“This is dope.”

“Mm-mm.”

“You think so too, Olto?”

“Mm.”

That made two of us, then. Additionally, the fountain only required four farm slots; all things considered, I was extremely eager to have it. The only thing that held me back was the price, a hefty 20,000 G. That being said, I used purified water almost every day to concoct potions and the like using the herbs grown on our farm; I could probably get my money’s worth in twenty days’ time.

“Know what? I’ll buy it.”

“Mm!”

“Thank you for your purchase. Here you go.”

“And this is...?” I asked, staring quizzically at the sheet of parchment the shop assistant had handed me. The paper seemed to have a drawing of a fountain on it.

“All you have to do is place this sheet of parchment where you’d like to set up your household object and think the word ‘install.’ That will immediately summon the fountain you purchased,” they explained.

So this piece of paper was the actual product! How useful was that? I was grateful that I could take my time choosing where to install it. Once we returned to our farm, I’d find the perfect spot for it.

“All right, time for some fishing! Let’s go, Olto!”

“Mmm!”

What sort of fish can we catch here? I wondered.

Based on the fish shadows I glimpsed flickering in the canals wherever I went, it seemed probable that you could catch fish anywhere in this village. After walking around for a while, I discovered a particularly lively spot by the canal surrounding the large fountain plaza.

“Aight, time to fish.”

“...”

“Aye!”

“Oh, that reminds me. Fau, try not to play any music while I’m fishing, okay?”

“Aye? A-Aye?”

“C’mon, don’t look at me like that... You don’t want the fish to get away, do you?”

“Aye.”

After issuing Fau a gentle reminder, I dangled my line in the water. The peaceful sound of the water lapping at the stone, the

Undines' chatter, and the cool breeze felt wonderfully invigorating, as though I were camping by a mountain stream. After three hours of strolling through town and fishing in various spots, I had amassed a fairly decent haul. At the very least, I had managed to catch all the fish I'd seen earlier at the grocery. In addition, my newly acquired Water Exploration skill had given me a huge advantage, as it was essentially able to work as a fish-finder. While my accuracy wasn't high enough yet to tell apart the different types of fish underwater, I was nevertheless able to pinpoint the exact location to cast my line. Even so, I had a hard time catching begini eels. Still, I managed to catch two eels in the end, even if it cost me a significant amount of Roqué's paste bait that I had leftover from the village event.

"Okay, that should be good for now. Olto, pull up the lobster pot for me, will you?"

"Mm!"

Lobster pots were a bit of a gamble, seeing as everything was left to chance. If you were fortunate enough, you could sometimes catch something, although there was no knowing what you'd get nor in fact any guarantee that you would catch anything at all. Although it relied heavily on probability, I had faith in Olto's Luck skill, which was why I'd decided to buy it.

"Mm-mm-mm!"

"Hey, bud. Catch something?"

"Mm."

Olto handed me the lobster pot, which contained two prawns and two bivalve mollusks, labeled Begini Shrimp and Begini Basket Clams respectively. How on earth had the *clams* found their way into the trap, though? *Oh well, guess this is a game. Best not to think too hard about it.*

"We did it, buddy!"

"Mm!"

I'd had my fill of fishing for the day and done a fair amount of sightseeing. That left me with...

"Guess we oughta check out the dungeon next."

That was the meat of the matter, after all, and I could always just book it if the dungeon proved to be way beyond my capabilities.

"Time to get going, everyone."

I rounded up my remaining companions, who had been splashing about in the water, before heading to the Undines' dungeon.

"Chirp!"

"Aye!"

Understandably, the itty-bitty duo on my shoulders gaped at the door leading to the dungeon. I didn't blame them, though. Up close, the door was far larger than I had imagined: it had to be at least

twenty meters tall. After basking in the beauty of the village, the stately stone gate felt incredibly foreboding. A lone Undine stood before the gate, acting as a sentinel. Unlike the chief, who was a unique specimen, this Undine looked identical to the others in town.

“Greetings. Would you like to attempt the Water Elementals’ trial?” the sentinel asked.

“That’s the plan,” I replied. “Can I ask you something first, though?”

“Certainly. Go ahead.”

“Will I still be able to leave the dungeon after entering? I’m not gonna be trapped in there until I complete the trial, am I?”

“Fear not. You may return anytime you wish.”

Thankfully, the same rules as a regular dungeon seemed to apply here. In that case, I didn’t see the harm in going in. Even if I couldn’t fight, chances were I’d find something valuable along the way.

“Okay, I accept.”

“Very well. May luck be in your favor,” the Undine nodded, before pressing a hand to the gate. The next instant, we were engulfed in blue light, and the scenery around us did a one-eighty.

“Is this a trap room...? Careful, everyone! There’s no telling what might jump out at us!”

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

We surveyed our surroundings cautiously, eyes peeled and ears open for any sudden movement.

“...Chirp?”

“...Growl?”

Several seconds passed, but nothing happened. Evidently, the dungeon was designed so that players didn’t encounter anything in the first room.

“...Sheesh. Talk about a letdown.”

“Aye.”

Of course, I couldn’t help feeling a sense of relief. The interior of the dungeon was constructed from a different type of material from that used in the village square. Instead of white marble, the dungeon was carved out of roughly textured stone with a bluish tint, similar to blue quartzite. The first room we came across was roughly the size of a typical traditional Japanese guest room. A long corridor stretched into the darkness beyond, and the trenches on both sides of the room were about as wide as a large bathtub and filled with crystal clear water. Shadows flickered across the walls, seemingly cast by some kind of underwater light source. The whole room had a dreamlike quality to it, enough to make you forget you were actually in a dungeon. A small door stood behind us. Upon touching it, a window

popped up, asking me whether I wanted to exit the dungeon. The sentinel hadn't been lying then. Knowing I could escape anytime if I wished to put my mind at ease. The less I had to worry about, the more freely I could explore the dungeon.

"What's that glow in the water?"

"Mm-mm."

"Growl."

I peered inside the trenches with Olto and Bear Bear, curious to find out what was responsible for creating such an enchanting view.

"That must be it. I can see a ball of light at the bottom."

"Chirp."

"Aye."

Rick and Fau, who were perched atop my head, sighed in awe as they gazed down into the water.

"Didn't expect it to be so deep, though..."

Judging by how far below the luminous sphere was, the trench had to be about ten meters deep. If a player who was incapable of swimming were to fall in, that'd be enough to warrant an instant respawn. *Could this be a trap too?* I wondered. From the looks of it, the trench appeared to be wider at the base. It seemed like the water on both sides flowed into each other and met at the bottom.

"Clearly, this situation calls for something special."

This was the perfect opportunity to use my Water Exploration skill. The sonar emitted a high-pitched sound before appearing as a 3D map under the water.

"Cool, so they *are* connected."

I hadn't realized it until now, but we actually seemed to be standing on some sort of bridge. In addition to the water beneath it being deep, there appeared to be a hidden treasure chest right below us, roughly ten meters below. The chest was expertly tucked away out of sight, making it impossible to discover from above. All of this information was color coded on my 3D map. This skill was turning out to be far more useful than I'd initially expected.

"Man... A treasure chest, huh? Obviously, I'd love to get my hands on one, but..."

Unfortunately, none of my monsters possessed diving skills.

"Guess it's up to me... Aqua Lung!"

I briefly considered using my water breathing tablet, but in the end, I decided against it, figuring Aqua Lung would suffice.

"See you in a bit, guys."

"..." Sakura glanced up at me, visibly concerned.

"Don't worry. I'll be fine," I said, patting her on the head. Steeling myself, I plunged into the water. It was then that I realized my mistake.

(Crap. My robes are soaking up water like crazy...)

I hadn't been particularly bothered the last time I entered a canal, but this felt different. While it wasn't as bad as getting soaked in real life, having wet clothes clinging to my entire body meant my movements were severely restricted. So *this* was what Sakura had been worried about!

Damn it. Guess I've no other choice. Grudgingly, I removed all of my protective gear, robes included, and stashed them away in my inventory. *There, that ought to improve things a bit.* Of course, it went without saying that I was done for if I encountered a monster in this vulnerable state. My plan worked, however: once my body was no longer encumbered by restrictive clothing, I was able to swim freely, and I even felt calm enough to enjoy the view in front of me. Stripped down to my undergarments, I felt as though I were skin diving among ancient ruins. There was none of the usual eeriness one might experience underwater either, thanks to the sphere of light illuminating my surroundings. All in all, the sight was nothing but beautiful. *Whoops, now's not the time to be marveling at the view.* I had to act quickly before my skill reached its time limit.

As I swam farther down, I discovered that the trench was far more vast than I thought. My novice Water Exploration skill was nowhere near advanced enough to search the whole area. To my amazement, I saw a corridor that seemed to stretch on indefinitely. Were these underwater sections part of the dungeon as well? If so, this would be pretty tough to clear. At any rate, it wasn't something I could accomplish on my own without the aid of my monsters, essentially rendering this a suicide mission. Right now, my priority was the loot box, which was already within arm's reach. Just as I was about to stretch my hand out towards it, it suddenly occurred to me that there might be a trap. If I were attacked now, with no armor to protect me, that could only mean bad news. All things considered, I decided to resurface before attempting anything further.

"Gaah! What should I do about that chest?" I gasped as I came up for air. Although I desperately wanted to open it, I didn't want to die trying. However, without any armor to protect my body, I was easy prey for any danger that could befall me.

"...Guess that's my only option."

This called for a new skill. Since I still had some bonus points left, I decided to obtain something that could aid me in my mission. After some deliberation, I settled on the skills Trap Detection and Swimming. Trap Detection enabled you to sniff out the presence of traps in a given area. It was bound to come in handy in cases like this where I had to go solo. Swimming, meanwhile, I had opted to learn since it allowed you to swim with your equipment on. I figured it

wouldn't hurt to know how to swim, as it seemed likely that I'd be going on fishing trips more frequently. The former cost four points to obtain, the latter two points.

"Okay. Time for take two."

"...!"

"Aye!"

"Thanks. I'll do my best."

Upon reentering the water, I found that I could now swim with ease even with my robes on. While they still felt a bit heavy, it was nothing compared to the discomfort I'd felt earlier. After scanning the treasure chest with my Trap Detection skill, I was somewhat disappointed to learn that it in fact contained *no* traps. *Man, all that fuss over nothing. Oh well, I would have needed this skill sooner or later anyway*, I told myself as I opened the loot box, feeling a touch of dissatisfaction. The chest contained a single necklace. I swam back to the surface, deciding to assess it once I was on dry land again. Now that I had a good look at it, it actually seemed quite useful.

"An 'Air Necklace,' eh? Neat."

Name: Air Necklace

Rarity: 3 / Quality: 9★ / Durability: 200

Effect: Defense +4. Grants breathing bonuses.

Weight: 1

As the name implied, the necklace supplied you with oxygen and gave you a boost while breathing underwater. Despite its meager defense stats, I wasn't too bothered, as it would likely prove crucial in clearing this dungeon. Additionally, I had received a gift box in my inventory, which turned out to be a reward for being the first player to discover the hidden treasure chest. Obviously, I had no objections to that. I opened the box to find a jewel called a blue jade nested within. It looked similar to the green jade I'd obtained a while back, albeit in a different color. *Sweet*. Not only did it fetch a decent price on the market, but I could also use it for crafting accessories.

Incidentally, loot boxes functioned similarly to gathering nodes in this game and could be rediscovered by every player. Therefore, my opening a chest had no effect whatsoever on the number of loot boxes available to other players. The only exception was the gift box I'd received as a special bonus for being the first to discover this one.

I picked up the necklace and immediately put it around my neck. The design was a simple string of alternating blue and white glass beads. It wasn't something I would ever consider wearing in real life, but I suppose it didn't look half bad on my beautified avatar.

"Think we've seen everything there is to see in this room. Let's

move on, shall we?"

"Aye!"

Naturally, we were going to see what was down the landside corridor.

"I'm counting on you, Olto."

"Mm-mm!"

As our tank and experienced Night Vision user, Olto led the way down the dimly lit corridor. The next room looked almost exactly the same as the first room, the only difference being that this one was slightly larger. I reckoned you'd have to be pretty lucky to find an affordable apartment with a living room this size.

"No enemies, tho—"

"Croak!"

"What the?! No way!"

As soon as we reached the center of the room, a monster lunged out from the water towards us in the most terrifying manner imaginable. *So much for peering inside the room and skedaddling.* My Water Exploration skill's range was still limited, and while I could probably sweep the area if I moved to the center of the room, going that far in meant we'd most likely encounter a monster, like what was happening right now. I vowed to stay close to the entrance and use my skill in short bursts in the next room. For now, however, we had this guy to deal with.

"Never seen this monster before."

It was called a Pond Turtle—a small turtle-type monster. Judging by the speed it had jumped out with, it seemed capable of moving pretty fast despite being a turtle. Since this was my first time encountering this monster, I had a bit of analyzing to do.

"Hmm... Doesn't seem like it's tameable."

Since I couldn't select it as a target, that either meant it was a nontameable creature or a Summoner-specific monster. In that case, my only remaining option was to defeat it.

"There's only one of them, so let's give it a shot. Get ready, guys!"

"Mm-mm!"

"Growl growl!"

My vanguards beamed and stepped forward, seemingly eager to throw hands.

"Fau, make sure to back the others up. Sakura, Rick, time for a preemptive attack!"

"La la la...♪"

"...!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Croooak!"

Although both Sakura and Rick got clean hits in with their whip

and blue acorn bomb respectively, the Pond Turtle's HP only dropped by a measly ten percent. *But of course—turtles had ridiculously hard shells!* Thus began our drawn-out battle with the turtle beast, who proved a more formidable foe than anticipated.

The Pond Turtle had two main forms of attack, namely Charge and Water Gun, the latter being a move that involved the turtle blasting its target with a forceful shot of water from its mouth. Both were powerful enough to halve our HP bars. Furthermore, our attacks proved meaningless when the turtle retreated inside its shell, recovering some of its HP. For monsters that were highly resistant to physical damage, magic was our best bet. Unfortunately, my water-based attacks suffered a devastating eighty percent drop in effectiveness due to the turtle also being a water-type, and Fau's Fire Summoning wasn't very effective either.

That left us with tree magic, which was about the only effective card we had against water-types. However, given that my tree magic was still at beginner level, it was only as strong as my Aqua Ball, which wasn't saying much. Moreover, the tree magic attack that I'd learned at level 1 was Wood Whip, a move that made vines sprout from the ground. Frankly, this "attack" was more of a restraining move, not capable of dealing significant amounts of damage to your opponent. Considering how much damage Sakura's tree magic and Rick's nut bombs dealt, I was initially disappointed that we had only been able to deplete ten percent of the turtle's HP. Over the course of our fight, however, I gradually realized that even ten percent was a pretty impressive feat.

Finally, after twenty long minutes, Sakura paralyzed the turtle with her tree magic, and Rick dealt the finishing blow with a blue acorn bomb. That was by far the longest fight we'd ever had against a mob. Another ten minutes, and we'd have been forced to quit the battle.

"Phew. That was rough."

"Chirp."

Granted, the turtle had outmatched us in terms of overall level, but it had also possessed defenses that were hard to crack. It was obvious from this fight that our party struggled with bullet-sponge-type enemies. *What now?* It'd be incredibly dangerous if we encountered multiple turtles at once. If there were three or more of them, our chances of winning were slim to none.

"If that happens, we'll just make a run for it."

"Mm-mm."

A brief search of the room turned up nothing—at least, not on ground level. As expected, I did find something in the water instead. I dove in to get a closer look and discovered that it was an aquatic

plant. Since I'd already found it, I decided to pluck it, regardless of whether I had the means of growing it at the moment.

Name: Air Plant

Rarity: 3 / Quality: 4★

Effect: Hold plant inside mouth to prolong ability to stay underwater.

Clearly, this *had* to be the main ingredient for water breathing tablets; I decided to gather as many of them as I could. In addition, I'd also caught some beini basket clams that had been too small to be detected by my radar. I'd hoped to catch a few shrimps too, but unfortunately, they were too fast for me to catch with my bare hands. I continued searching the water, but predictably, no loot boxes turned up. There was another path inside the water, though, which seemed to be connected to the previous room underwater. Needless to say, this path also stretched on to some unknown destination. There was probably some sort of important gimmick to this—not that it had anything to do with us, given that we were struggling with mere mobs.

As I continued diving for more aquatic plants, I heard a splash above me. Looking up, I noticed that Rick had dove into the water. Whoa, was he gonna be okay? Amidst my concern, Rick surged towards the bottom and yanked out a plant before hurrying back to resurface. He seemed capable of swimming, but only to an extent.



Nevertheless, I decided to accept his help, as I could always use an extra hand in gathering. In any case, there was no such thing as too many air plants. I returned to the surface a few times to refill my lungs and eventually collected most of the plants and clams in the area.

“Ready to move on to the next room?”

“Growl!”

“Chirp!”

I proceeded to the next room with my monsters, who seemed pumped and ready for more. Naturally, we had gotten back into formation, with Olto at the vanguard and me following closely behind, putting out my feelers for signs of traps. I couldn’t detect any traps in the corridor, though, either because that was how this dungeon worked, or simply because we were only at the beginning stages. A ray of light glimmered ahead in the darkness, signaling that we had almost arrived at the next room. However, when we were mere paces away from the door, I signaled Olto to stop.

“Wait! Stop, Olto!”

“Mm?”

“No, don’t go in. Do you see *that*?”

I had already caught a glimpse of the monster awaiting us. The creature stood in the center of the room, swaying dangerously as it waited for us to enter its lair.

“Y-Yikes!”

Bloody hell! What the heck was that *awful* thing?! I shuddered at the sight of the fearsome ogress. The ogress had light blue hair and wore a gauzy outfit, much like the Undines we had seen in town. However, her features were contorted beyond recognition, possessing none of the ethereal beauty her kinsfolk had. She had severely arched eyebrows, wide-open eyes that rolled back in their sockets, gaunt cheeks, and numerous deep lines etched on her face. Her mouth was tightened into a thin line, and I could almost hear her gnashing her teeth out of fury. Overall, her appearance brought a monstrous crone to mind. According to my Appraisal skill, she was a Deranged Water Elemental.

So, this was what the chief and sentinel had warned me about. People who scared easily would likely freak out if they saw her, as she was basically the stuff of nightmares. At the moment, there was no one else besides her, and she hadn’t noticed us yet. We had the perfect opportunity to spring a preemptive attack on her.

“All right, let’s go!”

“...!”

At my signal, we charged at the Water Elemental together. I made

sure to use my tree magic as well so we could get in as much damage as possible—which worked pretty well! I reckoned I’d managed to shave about five percent of her HP off in one hit. That reminded me: this was due to the effect of The Dryad’s Blessing I’d received before.

Title: The Dryad’s Blessing

Effect: Increases damage towards and lessens damage received from tree-type and elemental-type monsters during battle.

The Deranged Water Elemental proved to be just as much of a nuisance as the Pond Turtle. While she was more susceptible to physical damage than the turtle, her water magic attacks were a force to be reckoned with. Even with my title’s bonus effect, a direct hit from the Elemental was capable of depleting around sixty percent of my HP.

“Whatever you do, don’t *you* dare get hit, Fau!”

“Aye!”

Worst-case scenario, she could use the others as a shield. At her current level, a direct hit would send her to her death immediately. As much as I wanted to finish off the Deranged Elemental, I was forced to spend time healing myself instead. She, too, was another foe that possessed means of self-recovery. Even though our damage was adding up, the impact it had on her was negligible. It was going to be down and out from here if we didn’t do something, fast.

“...Wait, duh! I can try to tame her!”

If I could just tame her, the fight would be over!

Focusing my skill on her, I was relieved to find I could select her as a target. At this point, I had no choice but to have faith in my Taming abilities and continue using them until I was successful. However, my efforts were in vain, my skills failing me no matter how many times I tried to tame the Undine.

“Tame! Damn it, why won’t it work?!”

I supposed it was because she was far more powerful than I was. Even after over twenty attempts, the Water Elemental simply continued to glare at me with crazed eyes. In the end, I was unable to tame the ogress, and a blow from Bear Bear brought the battle to a close. No doubt we would’ve settled things much faster if I’d participated in the fighting... Perhaps it would be better to give up on trying to tame the beast and just focus on attacking next time.

“Mm-mm!”

“What’s up, Olto?”

“Mmm!”

Once the fight had ended, Olto began pointing at something in the

water. I stood next to him and followed his gaze.

“Hey, that’s...a mining node!”

To my amazement, there was a mining node in the water. So this was where I could use my ice ax!

“Mm-mm!”

“Olto, wait!”

I heard a *Splash!* as Olto dove into the water without warning. *Seriously?* Was he gonna be all right? Sure, he had been able to swim in the canals, but diving was another matter entirely. I watched him anxiously as he swam through the water, albeit rather clumsily. At last, he made it to the mining node at the bottom of the trench, which appeared to be located in a crack on the wall. Olto then proceeded to strike the node with his hoe repeatedly, his movements slowed down due to resistance. Once he was done, he flailed his arms and legs about wildly before returning to the surface with great haste.

“Y-You okay, buddy?”

“Mm... Mm...”

My poor gnome was soaked through and out of breath, his head practically drooping to the ground. It was clear that underwater activities were not his forte, although it was more an issue of not being able to hold his breath for long enough, rather than his actual swimming abilities. I checked to see what Olto’s reckless attempt had yielded and was shocked at the results.

“Whoa! You got water ores!”

Was this place secretly a treasure trove of water ores? It was possible, given that the mining node was underwater.

“I’m gonna go check it out too.”

Leaving Sakura in charge of Olto, I plunged into the water once more, using the new ice ax that I’d just bought. Due to its effects, I was able to swing my ax underwater without much resistance. Once I’d finished and resurfaced, I found that I’d managed to obtain three water ores and one tinstone. I had guessed right, then. These ores were still rare, and the going rate for them was as high as ever. And here I was, digging them up one after another. It couldn’t get any sweeter than this.

“Awesome. I’m glad I found this place. Any other mining nodes?”

I looked around the room with my Water Exploration skill, but this appeared to be the only node in the vicinity. I was keen to search the other rooms now.

“All right, moving on. Carefully, though.”

Encounter multiple Deranged Water Elementals? Time to skedaddle. Turtles? Same thing. We would engage in battle if, and only if, an enemy was alone. I supposed we could try taking on two turtles, though.

“On to the next room, everyone!”

Before we entered the next room, I scanned the area with my Water Exploration skill—no signs of life, thankfully.

“Good, looks like the coast is cl— Oh, for crying out loud!”

No sooner than I had taken a few steps into the room, a Deranged Elemental burst out of the water with a resounding splash, apparently having been outside my radar’s range. This was why I couldn’t afford to let my guard down, no matter how safe a place seemed. Seriously, though, this stuff almost gave me a heart attack every time. Heart still in my throat, I commanded everyone to get into formation.

“C’m on, there’s only one! We can do this!”

“Mm-mm!”

This time, I forwent all attempts at taming, concentrating my efforts on attacking instead. My monsters were also better coordinated, having gotten the hang of things during our previous encounter. As such, we were able to make it out of the battle relatively unscathed—except for me, that is. As always, I was the one who kept holding everyone back. *Sorry for being such a weak and lousy master, guys.*

“Wonder what’s in this room?”

I searched the area again and detected a hint of life in the water. Apparently, you could catch fish inside the dungeon too.

“Obviously gotta give *that* a go!”

I decided to take a short break and try my luck at fishing, dangling my line into the water in the corner of the room.

“...”

“...Hngh!”

“...Hup!”

“Not again!”

Yeesh, I can’t catch a damn thing, I grumbled as yet another fish stole my bait. Fishing spots within the dungeon appeared to be pretty high level, judging from the fact that the larger fish at the bottom didn’t so much as stir. I supposed my bait was too substandard for them to even consider it.

“Fine, let’s try this then,” I said, pulling out one of my Water Elemental’s lures. Each lure had cost me 2,000 G, the upside being that they could be used repeatedly. However, if a fish stole it from you, the item would be gone forever. If I were to lose it on my first attempt, it would be a huge blow to my wallet. Still, the lure was one of the prized gems I’d found in the Undines’ village, so surely it had to be suitable for this fishing spot. Taking my ice ax into account, it was possible that the lures had even been made with this dungeon in mind.

“Well, here goes nothing...”

I cast the lure into the water, not daring to make any sound as I stared at my line.

“...Yes! I got a hit!”

At last, one of the larger fish at the bottom of the trench had taken the bait. I started reeling the fish in, struggling against its size and weight. While it was putting up a good fight, I was determined not to let it get away. Unfortunately, just when the fish had almost reached the surface of the water, I felt the line snap, and the pressure on my rod lifted instantly.

“Damn it! Give me back my 2,000 G lure!”

I guessed I had panicked and tried to reel in the bastard too fast. *Now what?* I’d learned from that struggle that the fish would bite if I used one of my special lures, but... I’d been so close to catching it that I was having trouble cutting my losses. Although I could potentially reel it in the next time I tried, failure to do so would result in me losing an additional 2,000 G.

“Hmm, what to do...? Screw it, let’s go for it!”

I refused to simply accept defeat. After all, I still had one more lure left!

“Hi-yah!”

Using my Water Exploration skill, I determined the location of the giant fish and cast my lure near it. After I jigged the rod up and down a few times, the fish began swimming towards the line.

“All right, I’ve hooked it! Definitely gonna land it this time!”

“Mm-mm!”

“...♪”

“Aye!”

Olto, Sakura, and Fau cheered me on from the sidelines.

“Chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

Rick and Bear Bear peered into the water, seemingly fascinated by the battle of wills.

“Arrgghhh!”

After five minutes, I finally managed to reel in the monstrous fish with a forceful tug. The massive creature whizzed through the air before landing on the floor with a thud. Despite being a freshwater fish, it looked more like a longtooth or seven-band grouper, which were found in saltwater. The more I looked at its brownish body and red spots, the more it resembled a longtooth grouper to me.

“...Okay,” I wheezed. “What is this fish call— Huh?”

A red marker, reserved for enemies and the like, had materialized above the fish along with a life meter. That would mean it was a monster, though... I stared at the fish as it flopped about on the ground.

“Um, what...? Whoa!”

“...!”

The next instant, the fish spat out a jet of water. Thanks to Sakura pulling me out of harm’s way, I was unhurt, though that attack made it clear that this was indeed a monster. I quickly assessed the creature; it was called a Fanged Grouper. Evidently, I could also select the fish as a taming target if I so wished. I’d heard that fish were difficult to care for, though, as you had to equip them with special gear that allowed them to walk on land if you wanted to take them with you on outings. Furthermore, you had no choice but to keep them at the Ranch unless you owned a fish tank for them to live in.

“G-Get ready, everyone!”

Thus began our fierce battle...or so I’d thought. As it turned out, however, the Fanged Grouper was nothing but fodder. Being a dungeon monster, its HP and defenses were relatively high, but its movements were slow and its attacks infrequent. Sensing we could steamroll our opponent, I instructed Fau to strengthen our magic attack power as Sakura, Rick, and I ganged up on the fish monster. Fau’s buff worked on Sakura’s tree magic and Rick’s nut bombs as well, giving us a huge boost. Thanks to our relentless it’s-us-or-them attitude, we managed to defeat the creature without sustaining any damage. Had the fish been in its natural habitat, it might have been a formidable foe, but it looked like being out of the water had prevented it from unleashing its full potential. We seemed to have found ourselves an easy target.

“C-Could be an easy way of earning XP if we can catch another one.”

Weak or not, it still gave us a decent amount of XP, evidenced by some quick level-ups from Olto and Bear Bear. It would’ve been nice if they’d evolved as well, but I guessed that was asking for too much. My Staff Magic skills had also leveled up, enabling me to learn a new blocking technique called Guard. These fish were an absolute windfall, provided that I could catch them. After reeling in and defeating the other grouper in the room, we headed on to the next. *Come on, easy XP— I mean, Fanged Grouper!*

Of course, things never went that smoothly.

“Shit! There are *two* of them?!”

Not good. We had to get out of here, fast. Unfortunately, fleeing wasn’t an option.

“They’ve blocked our escape route!”

“Mmm!”

Curse those sneaky bastards! The Deranged Water Elementals had jumped out of the water and trapped us in a pincer attack the moment we arrived at the center of the room. My Water Exploration skill had

been unable to detect them, either because my skill wasn't advanced enough yet, or because they possessed some sort of ability that allowed them to avoid detection. Either way, it seemed like I'd have to give up on trying to sniff out Deranged Elementals ahead of time.

"Gah, what a nightmare!"

However, there was no point wallowing in despair and waiting for them to torture us to death. We just had to do the best we could.

"So be it... Listen up, guys! We're gonna concentrate on attacking them one by one. Rick, use as many white pears as you like! You're free to use your paralyzing attacks too, Sakura!"

I wasn't sure whether paralysis was effective against elemental monsters, but we had to use any means necessary if we were to have a shot at winning.

"Chirp!"

"...!"

Although our fight was by no means an easy one, we were eventually able to overcome our enemies without respawning. Rick's white pear bomb successfully paralyzed one of the ogresses early on, and Sakura poisoned the other one with her magic. Evidently, status ailments were far more effective than I'd thought. At one point Olto nearly went down, but I somehow managed to heal him in time, and we were able to drum up a victory. We were running extremely low on potions, though, so it didn't seem wise to keep on fighting afterwards.

"Guess we should get going soon... Let's just catch the Fanged Groupers in this room first, okay? We'll leave the dungeon after that."

Obviously, I wasn't done fishing yet! Those groupers were nothing but trash fish once they were out of the water, but I couldn't pass up this opportunity, not when there were three of them in this room. Unfortunately, the last fish I caught turned out to be rather nasty, swallowing my lure whole once I reeled it in, which I hadn't accounted for. Defeating the fish didn't bring back my lure either; once it was gone, it was gone for good. *Damn it!* Now that I thought about it, though, I would've had to fight a total of *five* Fanged Groupers had I decided to move throughout the dungeon by swimming. I would have died for sure if I'd gone that route. Exploring the water seemed imperative if we were to clear the dungeon; in order to do that, we'd have to take on more difficult battles as well.

"Eh, not something we have to worry about just yet. Right now, our priority is to get outta here."

We began making our retreat. It wouldn't take long to find our way back to the exit, seeing as there were no more battles to—

"Huh? *How?*"

I hadn't known this since it was our first time entering a dungeon,

but apparently, monsters respawned the same way they did on the field. Why was I relaying this fact *now*, you ask?

“Screech!”

Because the Deranged Water Elementals we’d supposedly just defeated had rematerialized before us, that’s why! *Damn it, I spent way too much time fishing.*

“D’aah! Fine, let’s do this!”

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

After fighting with reckless abandon for fifteen minutes, we succeeded in defeating the monsters. Again, I was the only one who sustained significant damage. *Why was it always me having a near-death experience?* Thanks to my flimsy defenses, however, I was able to discover something.

“Mmm!”

“Hey, is that healing magic? You learned a new skill, Olto!”

“Mm-mm!”

Olto had evidently learned a new earth magic spell called Earth Heal upon reaching level 20. That gave us more recovery options, improving our chances of escaping the dungeon without losing any of our members.

“Wait, *more* fish...?”

The fish seemed to respawn every hour in each room. If it hadn’t been for those bloody Deranged Water Elementals, I would’ve been able to go back and forth between rooms and keep on fishing endlessly. *Oh well.* For today, I’d just have to be content with catching the fish we encountered on the way out. Shortly, we caught another Fanged Grouper and finished it off. As usual, it granted us significant amounts of XP despite being ridiculously weak, allowing Sakura, Bear Bear, and I to level up. Fau, by now, had already reached level 10. Fish really was delicious—deliciously rewarding, that is.

Sakura obtained a new set of skills called Shield Skills, as well as a piece of equipment called a Tree Nymph’s Buckler, which no doubt strengthened her defenses. The timing couldn’t have been better. It was also fascinating to watch how she created her shield. First, the vines that circled her arm grew rapidly, blossoming into flowers at the ends. Those flowers and vines then transformed into a round buckler. It was a shame I hadn’t thought to film the process. Nevertheless, it was evident that our party had gotten stronger.

“Careful, everyone. There are bound to be more enemy respawns up ahead. Stay alert!”

After that, we defeated one Pond Turtle before arriving back at the first room we’d seen.

“...So it wasn’t a safety zone after all—we just didn’t encounter a

monster the first time.”

As a matter of fact, there *was* a monster in the first room, and an unfamiliar one at that. Correction: it wasn’t exactly new, being a Deranged Water Elemental. There was something weird about it, though...

“Its dress looks different.”

Whereas the other Deranged Elementals had been clad in light blue garments adorned with pale green patterns, this one was wearing a pale blue and indigo outfit instead. Her hair also seemed to be a lighter color than the others.

“Could it be a unique specimen? J-Just our luck...”

Not only did unique specimens have higher stats, but they also tended to be fairly unpredictable. Frankly speaking, they were the monsters I’d been dreading the most.

“We’ve got no other choice, though! Time for another round of Operation Paralysis! Bear Bear, Olto, you two go aggro it!”

“Growl!”

“Mm!”

A fierce battle broke out between us and the ogress. To my dismay, the creature possessed an AoE attack, forcing Olto and me to focus on healing rather than attacking. *Never underestimate unique specimens!* Although Rick and Sakura repeatedly hurled paralyzing attacks at it, we ran out of white pears halfway through. With Rick’s nut bombs no longer in our arsenal, Sakura was our only hope now. Still, she persisted, resisting the elemental’s merciless barrage of attacks. Thanks to her efforts, we were just about able to paralyze the Deranged Water Elemental; all we had to do now was mount a full-scale attack. We really were cutting it close, though, and it was only a matter of time before our recovery items ran out.

“All right, almost there!”

Our ruthless attacks chipped away at the elemental’s life meter, draining its HP before our eyes. Victory was within sight! Once we’d gotten it down to the last ten percent, I came to a realization.

“This is my chance to tame it...”

In addition to being paralyzed, the ogress was on the brink of death, making her the perfect target. What if the paralysis wore off before I could tame her, though? Olto was almost out of MP and could no longer use his healing magic. I wouldn’t be able to use mine either if I used up my MP for taming this beast, not to mention we were all out of potions.

If we got hit with an AoE attack, Fau and Bear Bear, who were down to fifty percent HP, would die for sure. Things weren’t looking too good for Olto either. That being said, this was a *unique* Deranged Water Elemental we were talking about—essentially Sakura and Olto’s

kin. It would be a real shame to let this opportunity go to waste. Sure, it looked intimidating as hell, but I was confident it would be a reliable ally once tamed.

“...Okay. It’s pretty risky, but we’re gonna try and tame this thing! Everyone, cease fire!”

“Mm-mm!”

“If its paralysis wears off and we end up dying, I’m really sorry!”

“Growl!”

“Aye!”

Bear Bear and Fau gave me a reassuring thumbs-up. *Oh, you sweethearts! I’ll make sure to feed you lots of good food when we get home!* Having received my monsters’ blessing, I used my Hold Back skill to reduce the Water Elemental’s HP to near zero and commenced my taming attempts.

“Tame, tame. Tame. Tame...”

My companions watched me with bated breath, readying themselves in case of an attack. Despite my repeated efforts, I seemed to be getting nowhere. As expected, taming a unique specimen above my level wasn’t a straightforward process. Still paralyzed, the ogress looked like some sort of mountain hag statue, unmoving as I persisted with my efforts.

“Tame! Tame! Tame!”

This wasn’t working at all! Still, I refused to give up, when suddenly, the Deranged Water Elemental became mobile again.

“Screech!”

“Yikes!”

Thankfully, it wasn’t an AoE attack she had let loose, but the elemental’s punch still sent my life meter plummeting to the critical zone. If I still couldn’t tame her, our only option was to launch another full-scale attack!

“Last one, I swear! Tame!”

“Aiee...” the Deranged Elemental wailed, glowing briefly. *Wh-Whoa.* Had it worked?

“...”

At last, the ogress came to a standstill, and a powerful light began to engulf her body. So I *had* managed to tame her.

“Th-That was close... Still, all’s well that ends well!”

When the light subsided, the monster before us had transformed beyond recognition.

“Hum.”

“Y-You sure look different.”

Whereas she had resembled a hideous mountain crone before, the Water Elemental now looked like one of the beautiful girls in town. As was the case with gnomes, she appeared to be a monster that changed

in temperament once tamed. Heightwise, she was about 130 centimeters, roughly the same height as Sakura. She looked younger, though—around the age of a junior high school student—and gazed up at me with a dazzling smile on her face.

Name: Reflet / Race: Undine / Base Level: Lv. 15
Master: Yuto
HP: 40/40 / MP: 58/58
Strength: 7 / Endurance: 7 / Agility: 10
Dexterity: 16 / Intelligence: 15 / Sanity: 11
Skills: Brewing, Aquamotion, Concoct, Fishing, Fermentation, Water Magic, Cooking
Equipment: Water Elemental's Staff, Water Elemental's Garments, Water Elemental's Barrette

Since she was a unique specimen, she already came with a preset name: Reflet. Her race had also changed from Deranged Water Elemental to Undine. More impressively, she possessed both Brewing *and* Cooking. That was bound to come in handy moving forward. Thanks to my Tamed Monster Formation +1 skill, an ability unique to Commander Tamers, I was able to add Reflet to my party too. I still had one concern, though.

“Hey, Reflet.”

“Hum?”

“Can you use your water magic for fighting? As in, are you able to attack enemies with it...?”

“Hum...”

“Guess it’s a no, huh.”

“Hum.”

Just as I thought—I’d gotten myself yet *another* monster specialized in making things! I’d suspected as much after seeing her skills, but still! Oh well, at least she had a staff. I supposed she could act as a tank along with Olto.

“Aight, everyone, come and introduce yourselves.”

“Mm-mm-mmm!”

“...♪”

“Chirp chirp.”

“Growl growl growl.”

“Aye!”

“Hum♪”

One by one, my companions raised their hands at Reflet in greeting, who waved back at them with a smile. Things were going to get even livelier on the farm. *Another* cute monster, though...? And a humanoid one at that? How did this keep happening? Before playing

this game, I'd imagined Tamers to be more tough and macho, surrounded by cool beasts and fierce scaly creatures. What if people thought I was some kind of sleazeball who deliberately hunted down cute monsters?

"I swear it's not on purpose..."

Anyway, there was nothing I could do about it. The fact remained that I was surrounded by cute critters, whether I'd intended for that to happen or not. Besides, I was hopeful that I'd get a badass-looking monster once my Earth Dragon egg hatched, which would likely make people see me in a different light. At least, I hoped it would.

"Okay, guys. Let's get outta this place."

Other than Reflet, who'd just joined the team, everyone else was in pretty bad shape. Testing her skills would have to wait until we were safely outside.

"Pleased to meet you, Reflet."

"Hum."

Chapter Three: Reflet Joins the Gang

We were finally taking a breather, having barely made it back to the Undines' village in one piece. Fighting battle after battle with powerful opponents had been exhausting, both physically and emotionally.

"First...let's see what we've got, shall we?"

Our expedition had been fruitful, yielding aquatic plants, water ores and tinstones, and several types of fish. In addition, we had obtained drops from Pond Turtles, Fanged Groupers, and Deranged Water Elementals.

"I can use the scales and shells to make something later. Selling them is also an option, I gue— Wait, what?" I gaped, thunderstruck at what I was seeing.

"A water crystal? For real?"

Come to think of it, Alyssa had mentioned that gnomes sometimes dropped earth crystals. I supposed it would follow that Undines dropped water crystals similarly.

"Woo-hoo, I got it back!"

I was genuinely stoked at having gained another crystal after sacrificing my old one; it basically felt like I'd won 50,000 G. I was so glad I'd decided to attempt the dungeon after all.

Two more items caught my attention, namely, Demon Fish Fillets and Super Fatty Grouper. Both were food items. The super fatty fish had to be a rare drop, given that it had a four-star rarity. My mouth was already watering at the thought of eating it. It was a shame there was no rice in this game, though; otherwise, I could have made sushi. Still, I was positive it would taste just as great as a steak or sashimi.

"We're gonna check your skills next, Reflet."

"Hum?"

"Hang on, gimme a sec."

I quickly perused the forums, but to no avail.

"Still no info on Undines."

There wasn't a single mention of Undines online. No one seemed to have identified them yet, and the lack of data meant that I couldn't compare Reflet's stats to those of regular specimens. If I had to make an educated guess, though, Fermentation and Aquamotion were probably the abilities specific to unique specimens. This was because Reflet's other skills—Brewing, Concort, Fishing, Water Magic, and

Cooking—were skills that I could obtain myself by using my bonus points. That being said, it wouldn't be surprising for a regular Undine to possess Aquamotion from the start, given that they were water-type creatures. Taking everything into account, I was almost certain that Reflet's Fermentation was the equivalent of Olto's Arboriculture in terms of special skills.

"Guess that means you're a specialized crafter-slash-chef."

"Um-hum!"

What was the difference between Fermentation and Brewing, though? I assumed it had something to do with the fact that fermented stuff was mostly solid, while brewed stuff tended to be liquid. Then again, the distinction became kind of muddy when it came to things like yogurt and miso... Regardless, I had no way of figuring out which was which here, so I'd just have to wait until we returned to town. Now that I had Reflet, my need for a brewing barrel had increased tenfold. I was determined to get her a good one.

"Dungeon, check. Shops, check."

I figured we'd accomplished almost everything there was to do in this village. Besides, I could always return another time if I remembered something else that needed doing, now that I had unlimited access to this place.

"Oh, better buy some potions for the boss battle."

Our unexpected discovery of the Water Elemental Gate had taken us on a huge detour from our original mission of clearing the Humming Forest. Admittedly, we were all pretty spent, but we could probably manage somehow. The Humming Forest's field boss was extremely weak, and players had already established a foolproof way of beating it. As long as you stuck to the method, you were pretty much guaranteed a no-damage victory. Obviously, the aforementioned strategy was outlined in the information I'd purchased from Alyssa, which was why I was confident we could win easily even in our current state. All the same, there was no telling what might happen; it was best to buy a few potions, just to be on the safe side. We traipsed through the Undines' town and presently arrived at the gate we'd first entered, where the Undine Chief was still standing.

"Going home already?" the chief asked.

"Uh, yes."

"Do come again, and take good care of that child."

"I will," I promised.

Although I'd hoped taming the Deranged Water Elemental would trigger some sort of event, nothing out of the ordinary happened as I parted ways with the chief. On second thought, that was probably a good thing; the devs would be giving Tamers way too much preferential treatment if something *had* happened.

One hour later.

“That must be the boss.”

After leaving the Water Elemental Gate and backtracking to the Humming Forest, we had finally arrived at the foot of the forest field boss, the Stone Talus. The towering giant was well over three meters tall and looked far from weak. In fact, defeating it would be a toilsome task if you were to fight it fair and square, and it had even been considered the strongest field boss in Zone Two at one point—that is, until the front liners figured out a way to best it.

“Let’s go, shall we?”

“Mmm!”

With that, we sauntered into the boss area in high spirits.

Rumble!

Upon sensing our intrusion, the Stone Talus charged at us. While it wasn’t particularly fast, I would no doubt face an instant KO if I were to receive a direct blow from its powerful stone fists. Rather than attack it, however, we immediately spread out across the field. I trusted my monsters to do their job, as I’d already informed them of our plan beforehand.

Rumble rumble!

“Too slow, too slow!”

Rumble!

“Over here, stone face!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Hum-hum!”

We continued to dodge the Stone Talus’s blows without fighting back. Suddenly, the giant came to a halt and got down into a crouching start position. I had to admit it had pretty good form.

“There it is! Be careful, Bear Bear!”

“Growl growl!”

The Stone Talus remained frozen in that position for several seconds as if gearing up for attack. The next instant, it went on a shoulder-tackling rampage like some kind of football player. Although swift, the attacks weren’t difficult to sidestep as long as you knew what was coming. Once we had dodged all of its tackles, the stone giant pitched forward and crashed into the ground. The impact of its fall had created a small gap between the upper and lower halves of its body, from which I could glimpse a glowing blue sphere the size of an exercise ball.

“Get ’im, everyone!” I roared.

“Aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

“...!”

This was how you were meant to fight this boss. If you ran around without going on the offensive, the giant would eventually go after the player or monster with the highest HP, which had been Bear Bear in this case. If we managed to dodge all of its shoulder tackles, the Stone Talus would slump to the ground and become immobile for a set period, exposing its weak point in the process. We just had to make a concentrated attack on its core then and resume running whenever it got up. As long as we had the means of evading its blows, winning with no damage was perfectly possible. The only downside was that this method was extremely time-consuming. No matter how vulnerable its core was, our firepower was hardly enough to deal significant damage: at the most, we could only reduce its HP by ten percent at once. This meant that we had to repeat the process at least ten times, dragging the battle out for almost a full grueling hour. Still, we persisted nonetheless, and aside from a few close calls, we finally succeeded in conquering the boss unscathed.

“Good job, guys. We can go to Zone Three now.”

“La la la la...♪”

“Mm-mm-mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl growl, growl growl!”

“...♪”

My monsters had gathered in a circle and were performing a little jig resembling the Mayim Mayim, a popular Israeli folk dance. Their victory dances seemed to have gotten even swankier ever since Fau joined us, and they took to dancing every time something remotely interesting happened. What were they, party animals?! They seemed to be enjoying themselves, though, so I decided to let them be.

“Hum-hum, hum!”

Reflet joined in a few moments later. She appeared to be getting a sense of how things worked around here, dancing merrily with the others.

“...Guess I’ll wait until they’ve had their fill...” I sighed. Still, I hadn’t expected to have to wait *five* whole minutes for them to come down from their high. Was dancing really *that* big a deal to them?

On the bright side, we had finally made it to Zone Three. As we walked on, my monsters still tired from their mini dance session, a tall rampart came into view. It stood out even from a distance, the blue flags on top flapping in the wind. Similarly, the wall seemed to be made out of some kind of bluish stone material. Our destination, the Eastern Town, lay just beyond the enormous gate. No special permits were required for entry, and there weren’t even any sentries to begin with. All we had to do was walk through the wide-open gate. I

checked my status window, and sure enough, my current location was marked as the Eastern Town.

“Finally! We made it!” I whooped.

“Mmm!”

“Pretty big place too.”

I’d heard that the Eastern Town was smaller than the Town of Beginnings, but at first glance, they looked to be about the same size. The width of the roads and the height of the walls were roughly the same, as well as the size of the gate. The only difference was that the houses all had blue roofs, and there were pops of blue in various other places. Evidently, this town had a blue theme going on. *Now then.* It was time to accomplish what I had set out to do.

“Let’s go to the Farming Guild first.”

“Mm-mm!”

“...”

My number one priority was to buy more land. As your Farming Guild rank determined the amount of agricultural space you could own in a single town, I was no longer able to acquire new land in the Town of Beginnings until I raised my rank. However, my need for more space was as urgent as ever, which was why I had decided to buy more land in other towns. Unfortunately, this being my first time here, I had no idea where the guild was located.

“Fine. Let’s walk around for a bit and look for it.”

“Growl!”

“Chirp!”

“Keep your eyes peeled too, okay?”

“Aye!”

“Hum!”

Rick was on top of Bear Bear’s head, while Fau was perched on Reflet’s shoulder. My monsters skipped along to Fau’s jaunty tune, positively elated. Reflet was no exception; she seemed to have made herself right at home. Could it be because they had danced together? At any rate, I was glad they were getting along so well.

“Hey, isn’t that...?”

“No way. Another one...?”

“Dang, Silver-Haired...”

“*M-Moe...*”

“Business as usual, eh...?”

Whoops, guess we had been too loud. People were staring at us everywhere I looked. *Sorry for being such a public nuisance*, I apologized silently, nudging everyone to hurry on. Ignoring the oddly persistent onlookers’ stares, we continued down the boulevard and eventually arrived at a beautiful, European-style square with a fountain in the center. There, I encountered a pair of familiar faces.

“Huh? Shuella? Seki? Fancy seeing you two here.”

“Howdy. I see you’ve finally made it to Zone Three,” Shuella greeted me.

“Likewise,” Seki grunted. The duo were none other than Shuella and Seki, the tailor and leathersmith whom I’d bought armor from a while back. Shuella gazed at Reflet, eyes sparkling with excitement.

“My, isn’t she a cutie? Is she a new tamed monster?” she asked.

“Yeah. This is Reflet. She’s an Undine.”

“I can totally see you becoming the center of attention again... Gotta say, though, that’s one badass outfit. Maybe I should make some see-through clothing myself.”

“I’d say your outfit is just as outlandish.”

“Heh heh. Pretty cute, isn’t it?”

Shuella was a petite, pubescent-looking girl around 140 centimeters tall, her hair done up in two pink bunches on each side of her head with a skull-shaped patch over her right eye. One thing that *had* changed was her outfit; this time, she was dressed in a garish red and pink miniskirt maid outfit. She gave me a twirl on the spot, her skirt swishing, the very definition of coquettishly cute. People who were into that sort of thing would no doubt have screamed “*Moe!*” in response.

“Kinda? Guess you could say that.” I shrugged.

“Just ‘kinda’? No need to hold back—I know you’re excited,” Shuella murmured, tilting her head coyly. Seki heaved a sigh.

“What did you expect? He knows you’re actually just an old maid,” he muttered.

“And whose fault is THAT?!”

It looked like things between them were the same as ever.

“Anyway,” said Shuella, facing me once more. “How about it? Got any plans to upgrade your equipment?”

“Nah. Think I’ll be fine for a while longer.”

“Thought so. What you’re wearing now is good enough for Zone Three—maybe even Zone Four, if you stretch it.”

After all, this robe was perfect for the Water Elementals’ trial. I’d forgotten all about it when I was in the dungeon, but the Fish Scales Robe I was currently wearing had both water resistance and adaptability. According to the forums, trying to swim in regular robes would have been far more difficult, and I might’ve even died if it hadn’t been for my robe’s water resistance. Thank goodness I had chosen this over the other options.

“I’m good for now.”

That being said, I was slightly concerned about Rick and Bear Bear, who lacked exclusive equipment. Even though Bear Bear’s outfit gave them an overall boost in Strength, it was pretty average defense-

wise. However, I couldn't afford to spend too much on my monsters' equipment when I hadn't even bought a new farm yet, not after my spending spree in the Undines' village. If anything, I had to *earn* more money by selling things. I decided to show the tailor-leathersmith duo the ingredients I'd obtained on the way here. I was perfectly willing to sell them if they were worth something, as I could always go back and get them again another time.

"Hey, mind taking a look at these?" I asked.

"Ooh, anything interesting?"

"Let's start with these first."

"Aww, these are Stone Talus items. Don't see any of its rare drops, the Stone Talus Souls either. I'd say this is only worth about 4,000 G altogether."

Figured as much. In addition to being easy to beat, Stone Taluses were a decent source of XP, meaning people were hunting them by the dozen. As a result, their item drops were in wide circulation, causing their prices to fall drastically. I already knew all that from prior research, so there seemed no harm in selling them.

Next, I presented the pair with my finds from Zone Two, which consisted of Little Bear and Wild Dog pelts, and Honey Bee, Grasshopper, and Slow Moth wings and exoskeletons. Shuella and Seki seemed happy with those, given that they could also be used for sewing and leatherworking. Since I had accrued quite a few of the items mentioned above, I was able to gain a modest sum of 20,000 G.

The last group of items I presented were the drops I'd acquired in the Undines' secret village. The items were of four types: Pond Turtle Shell Pieces, Pond Turtle Claws, Giant Fanged Fish Scales, and Giant Fanged Fish Fangs. The fish fillets and fatty grouper were stored out of sight in my inventory, as I intended to eat them myself later. I'd also saved the Deranged Water Elemental drops for myself, seeing as they could be used for alchemy and concocting, as well as some rare drops and Pond Turtle Aqua Sacs. Upon seeing the items I'd laid before her, Shuella's expression turned serious. As I was wondering just how much they'd sell for, she suddenly drew near me.

"Where did you get these?!" Shuella demanded. She looked intense—scary, even. Huh? She wasn't *mad* at me, was she?

"Huh? I, uh..." I mumbled, intimidated by her attitude.

"Hey! I'm asking y—"

Thankfully, Seki stepped in, grabbing Shuella's hair and yanking her back.

"Behave yourself, you hag. You're breaching gaming etiquette."

"B-But..." she whined, pouting.

"Players are entitled to keep their methods of obtaining rare items to themselves."

“But I wanna know how! I *wanna*!”

“Don’t you ‘I wanna’ me. It’s cringey as hell.”

“Grrr.”

“You said the same thing the other day and lost us a customer, remember?”

“Hmph. Fine then. Promise me you’ll come straight to us if you find those items a second time, okay?! You wouldn’t turn down a request from dear ol’ Shuella now, would you?”

Shuella clasped her hands in front of her chest and gazed up at me, eyes glistening with tears. Okay, that was pretty cute. I was utterly unmoved, though.

“Sorry, can’t make any promises. You guys aren’t the only ones I do business with,” I replied, thinking of Lewin.

“Darn it, my ultimate technique didn’t work!”

“How many times do I have to tell you to drop that act? You’re more likely to piss someone off than find someone stupid enough to fall for it,” Seki sighed.

“Hmph! Why is it that no one finds me cute or charming?!”

“Because you’re too shrewd, idiot.”

You said it, dude. I found myself nodding at Seki’s response. *Exactly.* Coquettishness could be endearing, but only to an extent. As amusing as it was to watch, Shuella was clearly overdoing it. *Who knows?* Maybe even the few people who “fell” for her act realized it was a ruse and decided to go along with it regardless.

“Anyway, how much for all these?”

“...Let’s see... How about 25,000 G for everything?”

“Wait, for real?”

Even though there were no rare drops among these, each item had still fetched a little over 3,000 G.

“I made sure to sweeten the deal for you too! Well? Makes you wanna sell at our shop again, doesn’t it?”

Ah, so that was why. Still, I now knew it was worth hunting Fanged Groupers, even if it meant risking losing expensive lures.

“I’d love to experiment with these new ingredients, and I’ve a feeling I’ll be able to make something really neat with them!”

“True. Fish items are pretty rare, after all. I’m sure they’ll fetch a reasonable price.”

Since there seemed to be a lot of demand for them, I vowed to return to the Undines’ village once I was done with my errands. First, I’d have to go to the Farming Guild.

“Hey, I’m looking for the Farming Guild. Either of you know where it is?”

“Sure, I do! It’s over there!” Shuella chirped.

“You mean down this street?”

“Yep! Just go straight!”

Just as Shuella had said, the Farming Guild was right down the street, looking every bit as humble as the one in the Town of Beginnings. It was a wooden, single-story building, one I probably would have overlooked had I not been informed of the location beforehand. Okay fine, I lied—I *had* walked right past it at first. Thankfully, Olto and Sakura were more observant and pointed it out to me. If not for them, I might have been hopelessly lost. Although I had struggled to find the guild, buying land was sure to be less of a challenge. After all, it was simply a matter of putting in a request at the counter.

“I’ll take these,” I told the receptionist. At my current guild rank, I could buy up to twenty plots of land per town. Since I had unexpectedly come into a bit of cash, I considered buying them all in one go. Farms were more expensive here, each type of plot costing 1,000 G more than it did in the Town of Beginnings. The highest grade cost 7,000 G, those with a barn costing an additional 4,000 G on top of that. Ideally, I wanted to buy nineteen 7,000 G plots and one 11,000 G barnyard, but that would come to a grand total of 144,000 G. I could hardly afford such a hefty sum, seeing as I only had 110,000 G on me. Of course, I’d already known from the start that I wouldn’t be able to afford all twenty at once, which was why I’d initially planned on buying only ten. However, thanks to the hefty sum I had gotten from Shuella, I was starting to feel a little ambitious.

“If I try hard enough, I *might* just be able to buy all twenty plots now.”

“Mmm!”

Olto seemed to agree with my decision. No surprise there, considering how much he loved farming.

“Think there are any quests I can fulfill here?”

“Mm!”

I canceled my purchase for the time being and went to check the list of quests available. As I suspected, there were several that were unique to the Eastern Town. I tried completing a few by delivering some of the items I had, but...

“20,000 G, huh...”

That brought my total to 130,000 G—134,506 G, to be exact. Begrudgingly, I decided to swap out a few plots with the lowest-grade option, which was meant for growing herbs. After downgrading six 7,000 G patches to 3,000 G herb gardens, I was able to buy all of my farmland for the neat sum of 120,000 G. I also made sure all of my plots were adjoining for easy access and management. Owing to how few farmers there were in town thus far, I also was able to secure a spot adjacent to the well and within walking distance of the Farming

Guild. Farmers were already a rare breed to begin with, and as most of them were dispersed evenly across towns, there was still plenty of fertile land to go around. *Who knows, though?* Perhaps there would be more farming enthusiasts among the next wave of LJO newcomers.

I also found a couple of interesting sales offerings at the guild, namely Crimson Grape and green peach seedlings. You could even buy trellises for growing said grapes, which were easy to install on your own. I decided to purchase two seedlings and trellises each. That left me with only 9,206 G, but, *oh well*. Some purchases were simply inevitable.

Incidentally, getting those few quests in had raised my guild rank. I could now hire an NPC to work on my farm if I wanted to, although most NPCs' skill levels were between 1 and 4; those who were above level 5 demanded a considerably higher salary. As such, I didn't really see the need for one currently.

"Pleased to do business with ya, and come again soon!" The receptionist waved me off.

"Crap, I'm down to less than ten grand now... Did I spend too much money? O-Oh well, at least I got a new type of fruit. Let's go see our new farm, shall we?"

"Mm!"

The Eastern Town's agricultural district looked no different from that in the Town of Beginnings. The roads and street lamps were designed a bit differently though, which made things feel new and exciting.

"Mm-mm!"

"..."

Olto and Sakura's faces lit up at the first sight of our farm, and the pair took off immediately. They really did love farming, didn't they?

I had made it a point not to touch any of our harvested crops and skip today's concocting activities so that we'd have enough seeds to sow here. Once Olto propagated them, we could plant them on the new farm and call it a day.

"Oh, that reminds me. Gotta set up my new decor."

I intended to place the purification fountain I'd bought in the Undines' village on my new farm. Unlike my first farm, which was already full, I had plenty of room to work with here.

"Where do you think I should put it, Olto?"

"Mmm..." Olto crossed his arms, seemingly deep in thought.

"I can see the wheels turning in your head."

"Mm-mm... Mm! Mm-mmm!"

"You want it here?"

"Mm."

A few moments later, his eyes flew open, and he pointed

insistently at the spot next to the barn. It would certainly be convenient to have the fountain there when I used the barn to concoct my potions. All in all, it was an excellent choice.

“Hum♪”

“Whoa!”

The moment I’d finished setting up the fountain, Reflet dove in. *Hey! What’s the big idea spraying me like that?!* She scooped the water into her hands and doused herself in it, smiling contently with half-lidded eyes.

“Hum♪”

“I suppose you *are* an Undine.”

“Hum!”

Given that she was an aquatic creature by nature, maybe she needed to keep her skin moist. I supposed I might want to keep some water on hand when going on longer journeys, just to be safe. What I was most concerned about right now, however, was whether Reflet’s dip in the fountain would affect the water quality... Ah well, I supposed I would find out tomorrow. *Let her have her fun*, I told myself. Ignoring Reflet, I continued following Olto’s instructions and placed one of the trellises behind the barn. The other one I intended to set up on our farm in the Town of Beginnings; I figured it’d be nice to have more variety in our orchard.

“Okay. Olto, Sakura, Bear Bear. Mind if I leave the rest to you guys?”

“Mm-mm.”

“...♪”

“Growl.”

Their salutes just kept getting better and better. Did they secretly practice them when I wasn’t looking?

“All right, let’s go get ourselves a brewing barrel!”

“Aye!”

“Hum!”

“Chirp!”

Our excursion trio pumped their fists in unison, with equal polish. *Oh come on now, there’s no way you guys haven’t been practicing.*

“Whatever. Finding a brewing barrel’s our priority now.”

According to the information I purchased from Alyssa, there happened to be a top Brewer in this town whom you could acquire a special brewing barrel from, provided that you fulfilled their request. I made sure to obtain the Brewing skill before we left, seeing as it was necessary to trigger the quest. All we had to do now was meet this so-called famous Brewer.

“Let’s see... Yep, this is it.”

At a glance, the brewery looked like an ordinary house. I would

never have been able to find it without Alyssa's help; how the first player had discovered it on their own was beyond me. I surmised they had to be someone with an unconventional playstyle—a weirdo, less charitably.

"Excuse me," I called out to the person inside, knocking on the door lightly. Within a few seconds, it creaked open, and a man poked his head out.

"Hello. And you are...?"

"Um, I'm Yuto, an adventurer. I was told I could find a first-rate Brewer if I came here," I replied.

"Not sure about the 'first-rate' part, but yeah, I'm a Brewer all right. The name's Marshall, by the way."

"I would love it if you could give me some lessons on brewing, if you don't mind."

"Sure, why not? Come on in."

"Thank you."

Things were pretty smooth sailing after that. Just as I'd heard, I received a quest from Marshall, who was willing to give me a Brewing 101 lesson in exchange for some green peach wood. There was no need for me to go out and obtain any, though, as I already happened to have some on hand. What did you know—the fee I had paid Alyssa included the cost of the green peach wood needed for this quest. The Quick-Eared Cats really were a top-notch information broker clan; they thought of everything, and their after-sales service was impeccable. I handed over the wood on the spot, and the quest was complete.

"Excellent, that's exactly what I needed. Very well, let me show you what brewing is all about."

Marshall then taught me how to brew alcohol, giving me a few parting gifts before I left. I received the following from him: a barrel that shortened the brewing time for alcoholic beverages, a Woodworking recipe for said barrel, and five bunches of crimson grapes to make wine. In addition, I was told that I could buy other kinds of brewing barrels as well, ones of higher quality than the ones usually on offer, which were supposedly excellent additions to any aspiring Brewer's kit. I asked to see them right away. The three types of barrels were standard brewing barrels, small brewing barrels, and home brewing barrels. For now, I decided to purchase three regular brewing barrels and one home brewing barrel, which meant we had five brewing barrels altogether. Since my Brewing skill was still at level 1, I could only handle one barrel at a time. However, Reflet was capable of using up to four barrels—the equivalent of a level 15 skill level—thereby enabling us to make use of five barrels between the two of us.

Marshall also sold a meager selection of alcohol, namely wine and green peach wine. I debated buying one of each, as it would likely be a long way off before I could make my own.

“Nah, maybe not both...”

At 1,000 G per bottle, they weren’t exactly cheap, so I settled for just one bottle of regular wine, which seemed like the more versatile option as I could also use it for cooking.

“And I can drink it if I want. Might be a good idea to experience what getting drunk in this game feels like.”

LJO had an Intoxicated status effect that occurred when you drank too much alcohol. When afflicted with this status ailment, players experienced dizziness and a decline in motor skills, making it almost impossible to walk. That being said, only players whose real age was above twenty, the legal drinking age in Japan, would be affected by this condition. To underage drinkers, alcohol would merely taste like juice. This game was pretty strict in that sense. Not that it mattered to me—I was a full-fledged adult, after all. What was that? Real *adults don’t take time off work to stay indoors and play games all summer? Tut-tut. Haven’t you heard the saying, “There’s a little boy in every man’s heart?” My body may be that of an adult, but deep down, I’m still very much a young lad. Such is the nature of man.* Of course I was going to drink!

Come again? There are men who are actual adults? Don’t be silly. Those “grown-up” men were simply good at convincing others of their so-called maturity; in essence, they weren’t that different from me. If anything, I would say they were suffering from a more serious affliction, one that got them high off their self-perceived “adult” coolness. *Obviously, people are entitled to their own opinion, but don’t think you can change my mind!* How else would you explain our company president’s self-centeredness?! The man might have been over sixty, but he was essentially just an overgrown baby... Whoops, got off track there for a second.

“We’ve got our barrels and some alcohol, so what do you say we go try our hand at brewing?”

“Hum!”

Still, this was a brand-new town we were in. I couldn’t help doing a little window shopping on the way home, although the most I could do was stare longingly at the shops, seeing as I only had 2,806 G left to my name. Browsing around *did* have its benefits, though, as I was able to find some Black Potato seeds and cure potions, the latter being an item I’d sought after for a while now. In addition to recovering HP, cure potions were also able to heal you from poison and paralysis. That being said, they weren’t very popular, due to their effects being negligible. Regardless, my heart was set on buying them, as they were

one of the ingredients needed to create cure carrots, a type of vegetable that could be made by fusing cure potions with blue carrots through Selective Breeding.

“Awesome! Looks like I can finally get my hands on some cure carrots!”

Unlike the last time I’d tried experimenting, I now had a wider variety of crops and ingredients to play with. It could be interesting to experiment again with my Selective Breeding skill and see what results it would yield this time. The last shop I passed by was a stall that sold spices such as salt and pepper, as well as many kinds of herbs. One item in particular caught my interest: a small, roundish bulb that sold for 50 G.

“Is garlic considered a herb?” I asked the shopkeeper.

“That’s right. It’s a kind of spice—great for cookin’ too. How ’bout one?”

“S-Sure, why not? It is pretty cheap. Say, you wouldn’t happen to have garlic *seeds*, would you?”

All the better if I could get some seeds too. I didn’t really expect the shopkeeper to have any, but...

“Seeds? Hmm... Well, I don’t mind givin’ ya some as long as you’re willin’ to fulfill one of my requests.”

What was it with NPCs in this game being so accommodating?! I was glad I asked, though.

“Great! So, what do you want me to do?”

“I’m actually starvin’ right now, to tell ya the truth. Mind makin’ me some good food? Oh, and make sure to use at least three items from my shop besides salt. Got it?”

A cooking quest with restrictions, huh? Interesting. The nonsalt items sold at this shop were pepper, chamomilé, basilil, red sage, blue sage, oregarno, and garlic. I decided to buy a bulb of garlic, the only herb I didn’t own yet, before returning to my farm to work on the old man’s quest.

“I’ll be back soon with some food that’ll knock your socks off, so hang in there, okay?”

“Lookin’ forward to it.”

This task called for the ingredients I’d obtained in the Water Elementals’ town. Now that I’d discovered garlic in the game, there were several dishes I wanted to try making. While I planned a meal out in my head on our way home, something suddenly occurred to me.

“By the way, what do Undines eat? Seafood? Or do you guys not require food like Sakura?”

“Hum?”

“Guess that’s another thing I gotta figure out.”

I'd just have to try feeding her different stuff and see what she liked best.

"Okay, let's get cooking then. Greetings, everyone. Meet Reflet, my assistant for the day. Over there we have Fau, who's in charge of our music."

"Hum."

"La-la-la-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la-la-la-la...♪"

Rick, ever the free spirit, had climbed onto the roof of the barn to sunbathe the second we got back. Meanwhile, Fau was playing the theme song to a famous three-minute cooking show sponsored by a well-known condiment manufacturer.

"First, lightly salt one demon fish fillet obtained from the Water Elementals' town."

"Hum."

"Next, coat the frying pan in some olive oil. Once it starts to sizzle, you can begin sautéing your fish. Mmm, look at that sear. Doesn't it smell wonderful?"

"Hum."

"Now, let's add some shredded basilil, sliced garlic, and chopped white tomatoes, as well as the begini basket clams we got today, shells and all. Also, don't forget to season everything with salt and pepper. Lastly, add a splash of red wine as a substitute for white wine. That'll be it for preparations. Now then. Reflet, could you please add some water to this pan?"

"Hum."

So Reflet was capable of using Aqua Create too. Not only that, but the water she created was of far higher quality than mine. Considering she also possessed Cooking skills, perhaps it was better to just let her do all the work...

"Nah, don't be silly."

"Hum?"

"A-Anyway, this stuff is like my hobby. I'll be in charge, thank you very much."

All that was left now was to wait until the water came to a boil, and there you had it: poached fish à la acqua pazza, courtesy of yours truly. Due to all the substitutions I had made, I couldn't quite bring myself to call it authentic acqua pazza. Traditionally, you were supposed to use parsley instead of basilil, manila clams instead of basket clams, and cherry tomatoes instead of regular tomatoes. I hadn't even used the right kind of wine. Regardless, the final product was still labeled Acqua Pazza, so I guessed my efforts had been something of a success.

Name: Acqua Pazza

Rarity: 3 / Quality: 4★

Effect: Recovers hunger status by 37%. Neutralizes the effects of poison.

My acqua pazza even had a poison-neutralizing effect. That could potentially come in handy if I got poisoned during a fight. Was it safe to eat on the battlefield, though...? Besides, it seemed more likely that the status ailment would wear off on its own while I was looking for a safe place to eat. Maybe it wasn't such a useful effect to have after all.

"Eh, never mind that. What matters is how it tastes. Let's dig right in, shall we?"

I knew it wasn't especially good table manners, but whatever. I started eating straight from the pan, savoring each bite.

Munch munch munch.

"Hmm... Not bad."

Although the taste was a little on the sweet side since I'd used red wine instead of white, it wasn't that far off. All in all, I had succeeded in making an unexpectedly toothsome dish. As I was feasting on my poached fish a la acqua pazza, I felt a set of eyes boring into me. I glanced up and saw Reflet standing beside me, drooling from the corner of her mouth as she stared longingly at my food.

"..."

"Hum..."

"..."

"Hum-hum..."

I tried moving my plate around, and Reflet's gaze followed immediately. *Left, right, left, right*—it was as though she were drawn to my plate by some kind of magnetic force, never once taking her eyes off it.

"Did you want this, Reflet?"

"Um-hum!"

Reflet nodded vigorously, eyes shining with expectation. She seemed utterly convinced that I would let her have it. With the way she was looking at me, how could I not?

"...Okay, all yours."

"Hum."

Evidently, Undines thrived mainly on a diet of fish. Since Reflet possessed Fishing skills, she could probably catch food for herself. Unfortunately, my repertoire of fish dishes was rather abysmal at the moment, consisting only of grilled fish and acqua pazza. I would have to make an effort to learn more recipes. After making one more serving of acqua pazza, I returned to the herb stall to deliver it to the old shopkeeper. Needless to say, he was delighted, praising my work as he wolfed it down.

“Well, we’ve got the garlic seeds we wanted. Let’s head back.”

“Hum.”

What next? I couldn’t really do any Selective Breeding experiments now, given that my crops wouldn’t be ready for harvest until the following day.

“I know. Why don’t we try brewing some stuff?!”

“Hum!”

I lined up our brewing barrels inside the barn and began checking their abilities.

“Should be able to make all sorts of stuff with these... For starters I’d really like to make some soy sauce, though.”

“Hum.”

“Miso’s a close second.”

I searched the forums for how to make soy sauce and miso; as it turned out, the methods for making them were pretty much the same until the final step. Both required smashing boiled soybeans and adding them to the barrel along with some salt water. To make soy sauce, you simply needed to add more water, while miso called for less water and an additional ingredient, edible grass.

“Sounds pretty vague.”

You could probably improve the quality by adding rice or barley to the mixture, just like in real life, but unfortunately, neither ingredient had been discovered yet in-game. For now, my only option was to follow this simplified brewing method. That being said, I did have Reflet on my side. Unlike me, still pretty much a novice brewer, Reflet had Brewing skills from the start. Since her Brewing level was higher than mine, perhaps she would be able to produce some high-quality results.

“I have a bunch of soybeans I’d been saving for Rick’s snacks. Do I just boil these in purified water?”

“Hum!”

That seemed to do the trick. After we boiled the soybeans, Reflet and I smashed them together into a coarse paste, before pouring them into the brewing barrel that I’d purchased for myself. To that, I added additional purified water along with some salt, then closed the lid. All I had to do now was infuse the mixture with magic once a day—a rather tedious process, if I was being honest. If all went well, however, I would have soy sauce in four days’ time. Sizewise, a regular brewing barrel had a maximum capacity of about five liters, while a small barrel could fit up to one. Consequently, we needed a lot of soybeans to fill them up: ten servings per barrel, at the very least.

“This seems way too easy. We *are* doing it right, though, yeah?”

“Hum.”

“Okay, I trust you. Let’s make some miso next.”

This time, I let Reflet do everything from start to finish. She was far more efficient than me at breaking down the beans and edible grass, filling up her barrel in no time. Although I was concerned about there still being chunks of edible grass, there was evidently no need to grind them to a complete powder. So the mantra “The finer or smoother, the better” wasn’t always true then. *Guess you learn something new every day.*

“Next up, vinegar.”

Ideally, I wanted to make rice vinegar, but since no one had been able to find any rice yet, I had no choice but to scrap that plan. What I *did* have was a recipe for fruit vinegar, though.

“So, I was thinking of fermenting some fruits to make vinegar...”

“Hum!”

Reflet thumped her chest, the spitting image of Olto whenever he wanted to reassure me. I selected a few different fruits from my inventory and laid them out on the table for Reflet to see; she then picked up about five of the crimson grapes we’d just bought. I’d originally got them to make alcohol, but it looked like Reflet intended to use them for vinegar. After placing the grapes in the barrel, she then removed the shoes on her feet, much to my confusion.

“Wait, what are you doing?”

“Hum!”

I gaped as Reflet jumped inside the barrel, landing with a soft thud. She then began crushing the grapes with her feet. Marshall had instructed me to crush them with my hands, but I guessed Reflet wasn’t strong enough for that, considering how light she was. Come to think of it, people *had* traditionally made wine by trampling on grapes—perhaps this was a more efficient method of doing things. Not that I intended to try it myself, no matter how “clean” it supposedly was. Game or not, I didn’t want to drink wine that I’d made by stomping grapes with my bare feet. The only reason I was fine with Reflet doing it was because she was an elemental, which seemed borderline acceptable.

Once she had trodden them to some extent, she filled up the rest of the barrel with some purified water. The rest was the same process as wine-making, which I had learned earlier during Marshall’s quest. According to the recipe I had, you could make vinegar by fermenting alcohol for a longer period. I wondered how long it would take to make vinegar in a home brewing barrel. Alcohol took three days to make, so perhaps five days? As if to answer my question, Reflet closed the lid on the barrel and made a peace sign with her right hand.

“Whatcha making a peace sign for?”

“Hum!”

“You’re not? Er, ‘Look at my fingers?’”

“Hummm!”

“Nope, wrong again... Oh, are you trying to say it’ll take two days?”

“Hum!”

Bingo. Two days, though? Even alcohol required three days to make, and vinegar was supposed to take longer than that.

“How does it only take that long? Does vinegar require less time to make than alcohol?”

“Hum.”

“Couldn’t be, right? Something to do with your skill then?”

“Hum.”

“Gotcha. Does your Fermentation skill help speed things up?”

“Hum!” Reflet nodded deeply. Fermentation skills appeared to be more useful than I thought: it essentially meant we could cut our brewing time in half. Now *that* was something to look forward to!

“Hey, think you can make fish sauce too?” I asked, putting away the unused fruits and taking out some fish instead.

“Hum!” Reflet nodded, picking up five begini dace.

“You gonna use them as is?”

“Hum.”

Apparently, there was no need to gut or slice them beforehand. Gently, Reflet began placing the fish whole on the bottom of the barrel.

“I see, then you add water and salt. ...Huh? That’s it?”

It was amazing how little prep the Brewing and Fermentation processes required. Although I was a bit skeptical, Reflet seemed satisfied with her work. Things ought to turn out just fine as long as we didn’t forget to infuse the barrels with magic every day. So far, we’d prepped soy sauce, miso, fruit vinegar, and fish sauce. That left us with one unused barrel. What could we use it for?

“Any interesting ideas on what we can make with this?”

“Hum?”

“You know, with the ingredients we have here.”

“Hum-hum... Hum!”

“Soybeans? Again?” I asked, puzzled. We’d already made miso and soy sauce, though... *What is she doing?* I wondered as Reflet started boiling yet another batch of beans. Was it another condiment? That didn’t seem to be the case, though, for instead of smashing the boiled beans, Reflet added them straight to the barrel. She then poured in just a bit of water before sealing the lid tightly. What on earth could she be making? *Let’s see. A food made from fermented soybeans...*

“Oh! Are you making *natto*?”

“Hum,” Reflet nodded happily. *Natto, eh?* That was actually pretty

awesome. I was a bit of a rice-for-breakfast guy myself, so anything that went with white rice automatically received a high rating in my book. There was one little thing that bothered me, though.

“It won’t leave a smell, will it?”

Oh well, I guessed I’d find out when it was ready. I decided to leave our barrels in the barn for now, as I’d probably be coming to our farm in the Eastern Town every day. I could infuse them with our magic then.

“Let’s see, what else is on our to-do list...? Right, fish dishes.”

Given how tasty the acqua pazza we’d made earlier had been, I was keen on trying out more fish recipes. Reflet and I cooked up a storm, making one of each of the following dishes: grilled sweetfish, demon fish carpaccio, demon fish simmered in miso, demon fish sashimi, grilled eel with kabayaki sauce, deep-fried shrimp, grilled freshwater fish, grilled shrimp, miso hot pot with fish, and caramelized small fish. As fun as it was, we ended up making way too much food. It looked like we’d be eating fish for every meal for the next few days. That being said, our cooking spree hadn’t been entirely on a whim; there was a reason we had cooked so many different recipes.

“Which one do you like best, Reflet?” I asked, placing the dishes we’d just made in front of her. I also included some raw fish, just in case. *That’s right*—the whole point of this cooking session was to figure out what Reflet’s favorite food was. Judging from how much she had enjoyed the acqua pazza, I was pretty sure she was a fan of fish.

“Did you like the acqua pazza best?”

“Hummm...”

Reflet seemed to ponder my question for a while. To be perfectly honest, I was hoping she would pick one of the simpler dishes, like grilled fish. *Please don’t say deep-fried shrimp or acqua pazza*, I prayed. Not only did those dishes use a lot of ingredients, but the process of making them was pretty involved. Alas, my hopes were short-lived.

“Hum!”

“Oh, *of course*,” I sighed, looking at the dish she had pointed at. She just *had* to choose the grilled eel with kabayaki sauce, huh? This was another troublesome one, between the high cost of eel and the amount of work, given that it required soy sauce, wine, *and* mushroom broth.

“What’s your second favorite?”

“Hum.”

“Deep-fried shrimp. Got it. Third favorite?”

“Hum.”

“Demon fish simmered in miso... I see.”

What I was gathering was that, for Reflet, the more expensive the main ingredients, the better. She also seemed to enjoy dishes that involved a lot of work. Her food budget was looking to be pretty expensive. *Oh boy...*

“Hum?”

“Nothing. Go on, eat up.”

“Hum.”

Now that I knew what Reflet liked, I began making other types of dishes too. Besides mass-producing her preferred fish dishes, I also created new kinds of pizza and miso soup, as well as some desserts. I now had an enormous spread of food in front of me, and even my inventory was packed to bursting; there had to be over fifty kinds of food in there.

“Oops. Guess that’s too much...”

“Hum.”

I really enjoyed cooking with Reflet, though—she was a total whiz at it. Still, there was no way I could eat all this food on my own. Perhaps I could sell it somewhere?

“Of course! The farm stand! I can sell these there, can’t I?”

“Hum?”

“Follow me, Reflet!”

“Hum.”

Together, we hurried to the Farming Guild.

“Excuse me,” I panted.

“Yeah? Need something?”

“I’d like to set up an honor system farm stand. I already have one in the Town of Beginnings. Can I install another one?”

“Sorry, no can do. At your current guild rank, you’re only allowed to have one at a time. What yer *can* do, however, is bring your stand over here. Well? What will it be?”

In any case, the only items I had at my farm stand at the moment were Sakura’s wooden crafts. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea to move my shop to the Eastern Town.

“Can I move it immediately?”

“Yeah, sure thing.”

“Thank you. That’d be great.”

When I returned to my farm, I spotted a familiar-looking stand in front of our first plot. As always, the NPCs in this game were quick to act.

“Now then, how’s the stock looking...?”

Obviously, Sakura’s products were still in there. Surprisingly, though, they seemed to be quite popular, and we were almost out of stock. Maybe I should have just left the shop where it was... It was too late for that, though. *Time to move on and start registering the food we*

made.

“Let’s see, which dishes shall we add to the shop...? Hm? Looks like some of these are a no-go...”

It was odd, considering how we’d added homegrown vegetables or herbs to most of our dishes. Sakura had been able to sell her wooden crafts since she’d painted them with weed water made from the weeds on our farm. Similarly, I’d thought I’d be able to register any type of food, as long as it used at least one ingredient from our farm...

“Let’s look it up.”

I browsed the forums and shortly stumbled upon a thread discussing farm stands.

“Hmm, not quite what I’m looking for.”

It didn’t seem like I would find what I needed here, as the thread had more to do with people who wanted to *buy* from farm stands, not sell at them. I decided to snoop around a bit, my curiosity piqued. To my surprise, I found that several players had mentioned my name. This was the first time I’d ever read about myself on the forums, and admittedly, it felt pretty surreal. As I scrolled down further, half-fearful that people were talking bad about me, I saw that someone had called my farm stand “herbal tea bonanza: the legendary farm stand that started it all.” Apparently, my herbal tea had been a much bigger deal than I’d thought, although said legendary farm stand was no more. *My apologies, everyone.*

“...Let’s check out the other threads.”

Even if the mentions were positive, that didn’t change the fact that reading about myself was mentally exhausting. After some more digging around, I finally found the information I was after. Now that I thought about it, only Farmers could own farm stands; I should have narrowed down my search to those forums from the start. The thread I found contained a discussion of what could or couldn’t be registered at a farm stand. According to the posters’ observations, simply using one ingredient from your farm wasn’t good enough. While it hadn’t been fully verified yet, it seemed like at least thirty to forty percent of the product you wanted to sell had to comprise ingredients harvested from your farm. In the case of Sakura’s crafts, of the three ingredients used—wood, water, and weeds—the weeds which made up a third had been harvested from our farm.

“I see...”

I did a few quick calculations and discovered that the same pattern applied to the food we’d made. While I was unable to register my Seafood Stew as it only contained one ingredient from my farm (basilil), I was able to register my Freshwater Fish Grilled with Herb Salt, as it was made with multiple kinds of herbs. If I made condiments out of stuff harvested from my farm and used them for

cooking, I could potentially register more dishes in the future.

“Reflet. Choose five dishes you like. Those we won’t sell.”

“Hum! Hum...”

Reflet began selecting which fish dishes to keep, brow furrowed in concentration. In the meantime, I decided to register some of those without fish. I chose dishes that were roughly mid-priced, excluding fruit juice and nut cookies. Taking past experiences into account, I also made sure to set the highest price I could, pricing each dish around 800 to 1,500 G.

“We’ve got pizza, pork and vegetable miso soup, calzones, mixed vegetable juice, cheesecake... Huh?”

I could now register up to six items—one up from my previous five—which I attributed to my guild rank increasing.

“Think I’ll go with vegetable al ajillo, then.”

Unfortunately, I could only register one of each, since I’d changed up the ingredients slightly each time I made them.

“Not that it matters much—I’ll consider myself lucky if anything sells.”

Wait a minute, though. What if I hired an NPC to look after my stand? They could be in charge of restocking the shop if items were running low. Since the cheapest NPC only cost 100 G a day to hire, I could easily recover the initial cost as long as I sold at least one item. There was no guarantee that my products would sell, though... Just then, I noticed several players gathered in front of my farm, glancing back and forth between me and my stand. *Wait, don’t tell me we’ve got customers already?*

“Hey, mind if we take a look?” one of them asked.

“Uh, sure. Go ahead.”

“Woo-hoo! Can’t believe I finally get to check out Silver-Haired’s stand everyone’s been talking about!”

Wait, what? I guessed that was to be expected, though, considering what I’d read in the forums earlier. Still, it was funny how things changed; hearing a stranger call me “Silver-Haired” no longer surprised me. Seeing how adorable my monsters were, I supposed I couldn’t help standing out.

One thing that did worry me was how the players would react to my stand. If they had come in hopes of buying herbal tea leaves or wooden crafts, they would be sorely disappointed. All I had at the moment were several expensive food dishes. I pretended to do some farm work a few paces away from the stand, nervously stealing glances at the crowd every now and then to gauge their reactions. If they appeared to be complaining, I would restock the shop with my previous items immediately.

“A-Are these...Silver-Haired’s latest offerings?”

“S-Seriously? Lemme see.”

“Whoa, check this. Isn’t that the pizza and miso soup that led Server No. 29 to victory?”

“Hey, dontcha dare buy up the entire stock!”

“I was here FIRST!”

Phew. They didn’t seem angry, at least. It also seemed that food like this was still pretty rare, so I wouldn’t have to worry about it not selling.

“Maybe I really should hire an NPC.”

It wasn’t as if I could constantly monitor my farm, and besides, it’d be easier to manage my cash flow if I could sell stuff even while I was logged out. I set off for the Farming Guild in haste, leaving the excited crowd in front of my stand to sort things out between themselves.

Online Forum [New Discoveries Galore!] A Discussion Thread for New Discoveries Made in LJO, Part 9

Feel free to report anything you've noticed, however trivial.

Don't make things up.

Don't assume others are lying.

If possible, include a screenshot as proof.

299: Hendrickson

Guess no one knows where the materials come from, huh? You said they were only selling one of each?

300: Hiruma

From what I heard, yeah. The player who was lucky enough to get the robe posted about it, and boy, did it sound like one heck of a robe. Not only is it incredibly lightweight, but it even has Water Resistance and Bottom Time Extension. Like, for real?

Bet players struggling to move past the Subterranean Lake in Zone Five would do anything to get their hands on it. I'd like one myself.

301: Hendrickson

I'm more interested in the breastplate, actually. Besides extending your time underwater, it also has Swimming Assistance and high defense stats. Pretty sure anyone who's ever drowned in the Subterranean Lake would want it.

302: Voyage

Shuella's happy to make those items for you as long as you bring the necessary materials, right?

Overheard her snap at a bunch of players crowding her shop that she would—for a higher price.

Even she and Seki don't know where the ingredients came from, though. All they mentioned was that they happened to randomly buy them off another player.

303: Fuka

That's so like Shuella to overcharge people lol
Went to the Quick-Eared Cats, but they didn't seem
to know anything either. In fact, they offered to
pay me a substantial amount of money if I could tell
them where the hunting grounds were.

304: Hiruma

My money's still on the Subterranean Lake. Wouldn't
be surprised if there were rare monsters or
undiscovered parts to the area, given that no one's
defeated its field boss yet.

Besides, the only places you can find fish-type
monsters are either the Lake or rivers.

305: Hendrickson

Seems sus, doesn't it?

We also visited the Lake, but the place was swarming
with other parties when we got there. Seems like
everyone's got the same idea.

306: Heartman

Henlo guys

Silver-Haired's done it again

307: Hiruma

LOL now what

Also, why am I not surprised?

308: Voyage

So, what'd he do *this* time?

This about the rumor that he tamed another cute
monster? Is it actually for real this time and not
just people spreading false info again?

You can never be sure, not when there are rumors
about Silver-Haired getting a new monster every
other day. Even less so with all those spoofers
trying to pass themselves off as him.

309: Hendrickson

It's so obvious they're lying, though—there's just
no way Silver-Haired would boast about himself like
that.

Besides, *him* posting in one of the offline forums?
LMAO yeah right

310: Hiruma

Exactly. Hard to imagine an avid forum-skirter like

Silver-Haired would actually post literal walls of text.

Plus, the REAL Silver-Haired would never refer to himself as such.

311: Voyage

Why not?

312: Hiruma

I befriended one of his friends, and they told me that he viewed his title as some kinda dishonorable mention. Apparently, he used to cringe a little whenever someone called him by that name.

He might be used to it by now, but it's still highly unlikely that he would go around shouting "I'm the Silver-Haired Pioneer!" from the rooftops.

313: Heartman

Got sidetracked for a sec, but no, that's not what I meant

What I wanted to say is, Silver-Haired's started selling new stuff at his farm stand.

314: Hendrickson

Wait, srsly? The herbal tea fans have been up in arms over it, saying the stall had disappeared. Is it back then?

315: Heartman

So actually, ever since I tried Silver-Haired's tea, visiting various honor system farm stands has become a hobby of mine.

Lately, loads of Farmers have been selling herbal tea and vegetable juice too. Pretty fascinating stuff.

Some players even sell handicrafts—you can find some great bargains if you're lucky.

Anyway, I was checking out the stalls in the Eastern Town yesterday when I found one that seemed especially crowded. Turned out it belonged to none other than Silver-Haired himself.

316: Hiruma

Well, guess he had to move on from the Town of Beginnings eventually.

Having a hard time picturing him fighting his way across Zone Two, though.

317: Hendrickson

And? What'd you find?

By "done it again," you've gotta mean he was selling something unusual, right?

318: Heartman

Get this—he was selling FOOD! And really tasty food at that.

One of the Chefs I was with could barely contain their shock.

319: Fuka

gasp Did someone say *food*?!

Details, please!

320: Hiruma

LOL of course YOU would react

Come to think of it, he *is* becoming somewhat of a household name in that regard too.

321: Heartman

I managed to buy fish simmered in miso, green juice, honey cookies, grilled miso pork chops, rabbit stewed in wine, rat skewers, fish stewed in wine, pork cutlets simmered in miso sauce, seafood miso soup, basket clam pizza, honey juice, and grilled meat.

It wasn't like the dishes came with special boosts or anything, but boy, did they taste amazing.

Oh, except for the green juice, that is. Pretty sure Silver-Haired added it to the shop without tasting it. You remember that health drink commercial where the guy is like, "Ee-Yuck! I'll have another one, please"? That was me the moment I took my first sip. Other than that, though, everything tasted way better than the stuff you can get from NPC stalls. That alone made the trip totally worth it.

322: Hendrickson

That's a lot of dishes. Don't remember players being able to register so many different types of food at farm stands.

323: Heartman

See, *that's* the interesting part! Looks like Silver-Haired can only sell up to six types of products at his stall at once, but as soon as they run out, the NPC he hired restocks the shop for him.

On top of that, none of the dishes were entirely the same, and the NPC seemed to be choosing which items to sell at random (maybe in alphabetical order?). So it was impossible to predict what we would get next. Anyway, we all took turns buying stuff and promised to not buy more than four items at once nor complain about what we got. It was pretty fun. Kinda felt like I was playing a gacha game.

324: Fuka

So many dishes I haven't heard of...

Y-You said this was in the Eastern Town, right?

325: Heartman

Uh-huh. Everything's sold out already, though.

I asked the NPC if they had plans on restocking the shop, but they weren't sure.

326: Fuka

NOOOOOOOOOO!

327: Heartman

Pretty unusual, right? Guess I got lucky

People who came a bit later looked super bummed out.

Ultimately, they ended up buying one of his mugs instead as a souvenir.

328: Fuka

Grr... That's it, I'm moving towns...!

329: Voyage

Feel like the Eastern Town's gonna experience a temporary population surge soon.

330: Hiruma

Can't deny Silver-Haired's influence, be it about gnomes, Thou Shalt Not Kill, or cooking.

And yet, he seems utterly oblivious to the fact...

331: Voyage

Think *he's* the one who sold Shuella those materials?

332: Heartman

Nah, couldn't be. Can't rule out that possibility completely, though.

333: Hiruma

That's our Silver-Haired.

Eventually, people are gonna stop being surprised and just assume that *he's* the one responsible for

any new discoveries.

334: Hendrickson

Isn't that already the case? Especially when it comes to titles and stuff.

Like the Elemental Gate-rumor has it that he's the one who found it first.

Turns out it really was just a rumor, though. The Quick-Eared Cats told me it was a different party that discovered it.

335: Voyage

Wait, the Cats are selling info about the *Elemental Gate* now?

336: Hendrickson

Kinda. They didn't know its exact location, though. Apparently, the first person to find it refused to sell that info. Y'know, the one that got the Unlocker title.

Still, it might serve as a clue, so why not just buy it? The Cats seem to do business in Zone Four as well these days.

Given that there've been two announcements so far, they probably have more info to share other than the fact that there's more than one gate.

337: Heartman

Not even Silver-Haired was able to find an Elemental Gate, huh?

Guess that's only fair, considering they're most likely located somewhere in Zone Three or Five.

338: Voyage

But hey, I wouldn't be surprised if he'd already found one on his own.

Who knows? Maybe he's the one who found the second gate... Nah, surely not.

Still, I can't help but think, *what if?*

339: Hiruma

Well, this *is* Silver-Haired we're talking about.

340: Hendrickson

Amazing how persuasive that line is every time XD

Online Forum [Gather 'Round Tamers, Part 8] LJO Tamer Megathread

Share the deets on new tamed monsters, show off your companions, etc.—this thread is for everyone!

Bad-mouthing other Tamers is not permitted.

Screenshots gladly accepted.

Avoid double-posting.

Be mindful of what you post.

196: KingOysterMushroom

Commander Tamers don't seem to have it very good, huh?

197: Ursula

Both HP and MP get +3 per level-up—this bit's the same as a standard secondary job class.

Other abilities are the same as pre-class change though, granting +2 to your stat total for each level-up.

By the time you make it to a tertiary class, there'll be a twenty-point difference in overall stats compared to a regular secondary job.

198: KingOysterMushroom

At least twenty, to be more accurate.

This hasn't been verified yet, but rumor has it that your Job Level needs to reach 25 or 30 to advance to a tertiary class.

199: Ursula

Meaning the gap between other Tamers will widen even further.

Sure, getting to bring an extra monster along with you would be nice, but is it worth it?

After all, it doesn't mean that your actual fighting abilities will improve.

200: Amelia

I beg to differ!

Commander Tamers may be weak, but they get to bring an EXTRA fluffykins with them!

There couldn't be a more suitable job for Tamers following in Silver-Haired's footsteps, i.e., those who prioritize having fun over clearing the game!

201: KingOysterMushroom

"Following in Silver-Haired's footsteps" lol

That's all the info I need to get an idea of what their gaming style is like.

But you're right. It *is* the perfect job for players who enjoy spending time with their monsters.

202: Eulenspiegel

Get this, guys! I saw Silver-Haired with a new hottie!

Anyone know anything about it?

203: Ursula

Must be an NPC.

I heard that rumor too, but the person who saw him said he had all of his monsters with him.

A Gnome, Tree Nymph, Gray Squirrel, Honey Bear, and Pixie—that's five slots already. He shouldn't be able to bring any more monsters along.

As such, the rumor verification thread concluded that it had to have been an NPC.

204: Eulenspiegel

She had a blue marker, though.

205: Ursula

For real? Sure you didn't just imagine it?

TBH, that part was bugging me too, but the verification thread said it probably had to do with a special event or something.

206: Eulenspiegel

Gotcha, maybe she *was* just an NPC then. Too bad.

I would've loved to tame a cutie like her...

207: Amelia

Not so fast, guys.

If Silver-Haired chose to be a Commander Tamer, she *could* be a monster, right?

208: KingOysterMushroom

C'mon. I'm pretty sure the verification squad

would've thought of that possibility already.

209: Amelia

Think about it, though. How many people besides us know about Commander Tamers?

Only one player has even been confirmed to have chosen that job so far.

210: KingOysterMushroom

I see your point now.

211: Eulenspiegel

Hey, what's a Commander Tamer?

That a new secondary job or something?

212: Amelia

See, what'd I tell you? It's not well-known, even among other Tamers.

213: KingOysterMushroom

Commander Tamer is a class change available to players who possess a Tamer's Book of Secrets, an item you can obtain with your event points.

However, if you've already advanced to a secondary job class, you'd have to raise your Job Level to 20 again in order to use it. So not many players have successfully made the switch.

The person who switched to this job class was only able to do so because they were still at "entry level" at the end of the event, so to speak.

All things considered, I had no choice but to give up.

214: Eulenspiegel

Huh, don't remember seeing an item like that. Guess I missed it.

No way *Silver-Haired's* a Commander Tamer, though, right?

I mean, the only people who are still stuck with their basic job class at this point are those who started late.

Hardcore gamers who've been playing since launch day are about to progress to a tertiary job class by now. Surely someone as famous as Silver-Haired wouldn't be on the same level as latecomers.

215: KingOysterMushroom

Yeah, you're probably right.

216: Ivan

Whatcha guys talking about? Silver-Haired *is* a Commander Tamer.

217: Ursula

Seriously? You're sure about that?

218: Ivan

Cross my heart—I heard it from the man himself. I happened to meet him in person and asked him if he'd be willing to share some stuff with me to post online, and he was more than happy to. Gotta say, though, it was still a shocker to learn he hadn't undergone a class change even once until after the event.

Made me realize you don't need uber-powerful stats or anything to enjoy gaming lolol
That being said, the only cuties he had with him at the time were his Tree Nymph and Pixie. No idea where this third mysterious beauty came from.

219: Eulenspiegel

Then...that girl *must* be a monster.
Holy shit

220: Amelia

I wanna know what she looked like!
You said she was really pretty?

221: Ursula

Come on, rack your brains! Give us every last detail!

222: Eulenspiegel

Uhm lemme think... Oh yeah, she was an Undine. She had light blue hair and was wearing some sort of ceremonial outfit, y'know, with lots of ruffles and stuff. Kinda like a folk dancer, I'd say. Heightwise, she wasn't that tall, about the same as the Tree Nymph.

223: KingOysterMushroom

An Undine, you say? Must be a Water Elemental, then. Where can we meet one?
Bet they'd be super useful in clearing the Subterranean Lake.

224: Ursula

Undine, Water Elemental...

Hey...what comes to mind when you think of the four elements?

Undines are associated with *water*, right?

What about the rest—earth, air, and fire?

225: Eulenspiegel

Let's see, Fire would be Salamanders or Ifrits, I think

Air must be either Sylphs or Djinns

Earth is...maybe Gnomes or Behemoths?

226: KingOysterMushroom

At any rate, we now know you're a massive fan of a certain famous fantasy novel.

Behemoths appear as monsters in this game, though. IIRC, the event raid boss during Beta was a Lesser Behemoth.

Other than that, I agree with you. Salamanders, Sylphs, and Gnomes sound the most likely.

227: Ursula

Right? So it's Water (Undines), Earth (Gnomes), Air (Sylphs), and Fire (Salamanders).

Meaning, if we can find out where Undines live, we might get a clue that leads us to the whereabouts of Gnomes as well.

228: Amelia

WHERE did you see Silver-Haired?! SPIT IT OUT!

229: Eulenspiegel

Um, the Eastern Town?

230: Amelia

On it!

231: Ursula

Catch you later!

232: Eulenspiegel

W-Wait for meee! I'll find you even if it kills me, my precious little Undine!

233: KingOysterMushroom

Welp, there they go...

Speaking of, Eulen better not do anything stupid and actually get himself killed.

234: Ivan

Wait, you don't think those guys will bother Silver-

Haired, do you?

They might be idiots, but surely, they wouldn't try to force him to tell them where he tamed his Undine or anything...?

I doubt I'd be able to face him again if they did something like that.

235: KingOysterMushroom

Oh, it'll be fine. Loads of players have their eyes on him, so I wouldn't be surprised if there was a group looking out for his well-being.

If they were to approach him carelessly and cause a stir, they'd get reported straight to the devs, by multiple people no less. Amen.

As a matter of fact, I heard someone from the verification thread tried to accost Silver-Haired and got a warning from the devs before they could even talk to him.

Some other player who caught wind of it must've taken action before any trouble befell Silver-Haired.

236: Ivan

Just hope they don't do anything to get themselves banned!

Especially Eulen!

237: KingOysterMushroom

Yeah, not sure about Eulen tbh... He *is* a certified idiot, after all.

238: Ivan

Y-You know, I think I'll go to the Eastern Town too!

239: KingOysterMushroom

And there goes our last member...

Jeez, how do they even know he's still there? *sigh*

Oh well, guess I'll go have a look myself.

Chapter Four: The Earth Elemental Gate

The day after our successful foray into Zone Three, I returned to the Eastern Town to check on my newly acquired land.

“Things are gonna get busy around here now that we have two farms to look after,” I said to myself.

I arrived at our second farm to see my monsters already hard at work. In terms of appearance, it wasn’t much different from our farm in the Town of Beginnings. Our crops also seemed to be growing just fine.

“Looks like the purification fountain’s doing a great job too.”

I tapped on the water coming out of the fountain and selected “Store in Inventory.” Immediately, my inventory was filled with fifty units of purified water, which would no doubt make the concocting process much easier. Thankfully, Reflet’s little dip in the water didn’t seem to have affected its quality. I infused the barrels in our barn with magic before joining the others, breaking a good sweat as we toiled away.

Once we were done with our work in the Eastern Town, it was time to return to the Town of Beginnings. Unfortunately, I was far too poor to afford the teleportation fees between towns. As a matter of fact, I only had 6 G to my name at the moment—the disastrous aftermath of multiple spending sprees. What was I supposed to do with mere *pocket change*? That said, I wasn’t utterly without a plan: I would make potions with the crops we harvested on our farm here and sell them. If all went well and they sold for the going rate, I reckoned I could at least earn enough to cover the transportation costs for Olto, Sakura, and me.

“That reminds me. Wonder how our farm stand’s doing?”

I could probably still afford the teleportation circles as long as I’d managed to sell a few items. I went to our stand, not expecting much, but...

“Asdfghjkl!”

I somehow made a verbal keyboard smash upon seeing our gross sales revenue, which amounted to a staggering 46,500 G. I hurriedly checked my logs and found that our food dishes had sold like hotcakes; in fact, they had all been snapped up within one hour of my logging out of the game. Even the wooden crafts my NPC had

restocked the shop with after that were completely sold out.

“Holy... What in the actual...?”

I turned to Sally (Age 27), the NPC I’d hired, for confirmation.

“So um, what happened to all the food I gave you?”

“As you can see, the stock has sold out.”

“No way...”

“What other jobs do you have for me?” Sally asked monotonously; the NPCs available for hire at the guild had a slightly robotic way of talking. It wasn’t as if they couldn’t hold a conversation, but their mannerisms were stiff, their AI probably less advanced than the other NPCs. Still, this was better than having them talk my head off.

“Hmm, now what...?”

There wasn’t much else that needed taking care of... The only thing I could think of was weeding.

“In that case, could you pull up any weeds and place them in that item box until your employment term is over?”

“Very well. I’ll get to work right away.”

With all the money I’d made, it looked like I’d be able to get away with selling fewer of my potions than initially planned—I’d still need as many as possible for the Water Elementals’ trial, after all. Now I’d only sell the ones that we had little use for. The oddly enthusiastic response to our food offerings had given me a bit of financial leeway. I only needed 14,000 G to get us all back to the Town of Beginnings, which meant...

“That leaves me with 32,000 G for shopping.”

I decided to buy all the items I’d given up on yesterday. First, I stopped by the magical tools shop, where I purchased a hoe and a watering can made with water ores for 10,000 G each. Both items were a must, given the bonuses they granted to Farming skills. I also bought an Escape Orb for 5,000 G and a Flee Orb for 2,000 G. The former was a single-use item that allowed you to escape from a dungeon by leading you straight to the entrance, and the latter an item that let you disengage from any normal battle. These would provide us with some necessary extra assurance the next time we attempted the Water Elementals’ trial.

Next, I purchased three black potatoes and three bunches of crimson grapes. While I’d already bought and planted potato seeds and seedlings the day before, I had yet to obtain the full-grown plant, which I was keen on using in cooking.

“There goes my money again...”

Yikes. I’d definitely have to curb this overspending habit one way or another. But first, it was time to go make some cash. It seemed a shame to leave our shop empty while we were gone, so I returned to our farm and registered more wooden crockery.

“Right. That should be it for now.”

Having taken care of our chores in the Eastern Town, I set off with my monsters to return to the Town of Beginnings.

“Let’s go, guys.”

“Aye!”

“Chirp!”

The two minikins jumped onto my shoulders, eagerly resuming their usual perches. The Central Square where the teleportation circles were located was only a few minutes’ walk from our farm. Once we were in the square, teleporting itself was easy enough; all it took were a few taps on my status window.

“All right, ready to teleport?”

“Mm!”

“Growl!”

“...!”

Uh, there’s no need for y’all to cling to me like that. I sighed as Olto and Bear Bear clung to me from both sides, Sakura clutching the hem of my robe. Even Fau and Rick pressed their bodies against the sides of my head.

“Oh well, never mind.”

They were adorable, and that was all that mattered. After selecting “Yes” on the screen, my vision instantly shifted, similar to when we entered the Water Elementals’ dungeon.

“Teleporting really is instantaneous, huh.”

Within seconds, we were greeted by a familiar sight: the square in the Town of Beginnings. Upon returning to our first farm, Olto and the others took off running, apparently dying to get back to work.

“I’ll leave the farm to you guys then.”

“Mm-mm!”

“...♪”

From today on, our workload was going to be doubled, but my monsters didn’t seem to mind at all. It was obvious how much they enjoyed farming.

“Chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

Rick and Bear Bear set to work with similar vigor. Fau and Reflet, the newest members of our team, were keen on doing their part too.

“Aye♪”

“Hum♪”

Fau helped with the weeding, while Reflet used her magic to water the crops. It looked like they were both following Olto’s instructions. Man, having skilled monsters around sure made work easier! Did they even need me? I might well prove to be dead weight.

“Might as well go to Alyssa’s...”

I left my monsters in charge of the farm and headed off to Alyssa's stall to sell more information. Money was tight, and a little extra cash certainly wouldn't hurt. Unfortunately, she wasn't in her usual corner of the square when I arrived. She seemed to be absent more often than not lately. According to my friends list, she was currently offline. I should've checked before coming; that was my oversight. This was to be expected, though—unless she was holed up in her room twenty-four seven playing games like me, it was unrealistic to expect her to log in every single day.

“No use wallowing about it. Better come back some other time.”

I shrugged and returned to our farm to begin preparing my concocting and cooking experiments for the day.

“I'd like Reflet and Fau to help me. Mind if I borrow them?”

“Mm!”

Good, I had Commander Olto's permission.

“...”

“Mm?”

I glanced at Olto, trying to read his facial expression. He wasn't *annoyed* or anything, was he? Tamed monster or not, Olto was always helping me out, so it was only fair that I treat him with equal consideration and respect.

“I'll be taking these two with me, okay?” I confirmed again.

“Mm-mm.”

I decided to start with some herbal tea since we were almost out of stock.

“By the way, Fau. You have Alchemy skills, don't you?”

“Aye?”

“Now that you've leveled up a bit, you must be able to do more stuff, right?”

“Yuh-aye!”

Good, her Alchemy skills had improved too. Unlike players, monsters' skills didn't level up individually; rather, their skills were all honed at once each time they leveled up.

“Aye!” Fau chirped, jumping off my shoulder onto the table.

“Yuh-aye... Aye!”

What was she trying to do? I wondered, watching her attentively. Fau gazed at the herbs in front of her, wrinkling her forehead in concentration. She then thrust her hands out, and the herbs emitted a faint glow before drying up rapidly. At first glance, it looked like they had simply withered, but I knew better.

“Fancy that! You can make herbal tea leaves now, Fau!”

“Aye!”

As I expected, her Alchemy skills had improved by leaps and bounds. One thing struck me as odd, though—namely, how Fau was

able to make herbal tea leaves without Cooking skills. If I remembered correctly, you'd merely end up with trash if you tried drying herbs without Cooking skills. That being said, monsters' and players' skills were bound to be slightly different in nature, so there was probably some kind of special effect at work. In any case, the important thing was that Fau was able to make tea leaves.

"Great. Keep drying these herbs for me, will you?"

"Aye."

With Fau's help, making herbal tea leaves would no longer be such a chore. By putting her in charge of the drying process, I could even mass-produce them and sell them at my farm stand. Given that other players were also making and selling tea leaves now, it was unlikely that there'd be another riot like before.

"Reflet, you and I are gonna concoct stuff together. Mind mixing this for me?"

"Hum."

Reflet seemed to have no trouble making medicine either. I found it rather endearing to see her so hard at work, like an overgrown child playing house. I had her concoct low-grade potions after that—this, too, went without a hitch. They were even the same quality as the ones I made, much to my surprise. *M-Me, jealous? As if! No, but seriously...* If Reflet could handle the bulk of our daily concocting routine, it would save me a lot of time. Letting the two of them take care of things (to the extent they could) would enable me to move on to other tasks. *Okay then, let's switch to high-efficiency mode!*

"Maybe I'll do a few Selective Breeding experiments before I head back to the Undines' village."

After all, I had plenty of crops to work with at the moment.

"Obviously, we gotta start with *this!*" I exclaimed, brandishing the cure potion I got in the Eastern Town. My plan was, of course, to make cure carrots with it. I used my skills to combine the two, and both the vial containing the red cure potion and the blue carrot glowed in unison, transforming into streaks of light that spiraled one another in the air. They merged, and emitted a powerful beam.

"Success!"

As the light faded, I was once again left with an item called an Unknown Seed. The last time this had happened, I'd fused weed water and spinach, which had resulted in the creation of bitter grass. I was sure that I would be able to grow cure carrots by planting this particular seed. Encouraged by the results, I continued with my experiments.

"Hmm..."

I knew that Selective Breeding involved a lot of trial and error,

but it was still discouraging to witness all my subsequent experiments end in failure. I tried every viable combination I could think of, but perhaps it was better to just leave things up to chance. I spread several potential options out on the barn table, I closed my eyes and shuffled them around. Eyes still closed, I spun around three times, just for good measure. This was my first time doing so in-game, and though it was all a simulation I still found myself becoming dizzy.

“Whoa.” I stumbled, nearly toppling over. Seriously, this game didn’t have to be *that* realistic. I gripped the edge of the table, trying to regain my balance. Once I’d recovered, I stretched my hands out towards the surface and grabbed the first two items I touched.

“Honey and bitter grass, eh...?”

I didn’t see how those two would work together. Still, it was my own bright idea to test out random combinations. If I gave up now, I’d have cluttered the desk and nauseated myself for nothing. Considering all of the pairings I’d thought up myself had ended in failure, it surely wouldn’t hurt to try something completely out of left field.

“Nope, that ain’t it either.”

All this did was create more trash. Since I’d come this far, however, I figured I might as well make a few more attempts. Naturally, it wouldn’t be that easy, though, and my next three experiments also yielded nothing but trash. On my fourth try, however, the ingredients before me took on a faint glow.

“D-Don’t tell me...?!”

What do you know? It *had* worked. I was awed at the unexpected success, but the unknown seed sitting atop the table served as tangible proof that it *had* worked.

“Really? Firestarter plants and amber pumpkins...?”

It never would’ve occurred to me to combine those two. Although I had wasted a ton of ingredients, I’d also had two successful experiments in one day—not too shabby if you asked me. Satisfied with the results, I gave Olto the two seeds for planting.

“Mm-mm!”

“Thanks, buddy! Now then, is there anything else we need to do before going back to the Water Elemental Gate?”

I was about to summon everyone when my eyes were drawn to an object in Sakura’s hands. She was sitting in a chair that she’d pulled up in front of the barn, Fau plucking at her lute from her perch on her shoulder as Sakura worked. She appeared to be putting the finishing touches to her creation, which seemed nothing like any of the crockery she’d made so far.



I assumed she'd made the chair herself, but what was that thing she was holding? A round, green object the size of a baseball sat in a small wooden dish in the palm of her hand. Furthermore, the object appeared to have thin twigs sprouting from the top. I couldn't tell what it was just by looking at it.

"Whatcha making, Sakura?"

"...?"

"Yeah, that thing."

"...♪"

I took the mysterious object from Sakura and studied it closely. Upon assessing it, I learned that the fluffy green ball was called a Moss Ball—more accurately, a Luminous Moss Ball. According to its description, it didn't have any special effects and was intended for decorative purposes only. While you needed to water it every day, that was all the maintenance required for it to maintain its luminescence.

"Whoa, how'd you even make this?" I wondered out loud.

"...♪"

As if to answer my question, Sakura patted the chair next to her, beckoning me to take a seat. It looked like she was going to give me a live demonstration. I obliged, sitting back in the chair, which proved to be quite sturdy and comfortable. Meanwhile, Sakura started whittling some wood, creating a wooden ball the size of a ping-pong ball. For some reason, there was a hole at the top. I assumed this wooden ball was meant to serve as the core of the moss ball, but what was the hole for?

"...♪"

"Aye!"

Sakura then placed some grass in front of Fau and exchanged a few words with her. The grass was neither flowers nor herbs; it appeared to be weeds of absolutely no value. Fau began drying them, and the weeds instantly shriveled, transforming into something resembling hay. My Appraisal skill informed me that this wasn't trash, however, but Dried Weeds. Come to think of it, I hadn't tried drying plain weeds before. Wasn't Sakura supposed to be making a *moss ball*, though? I continued observing her work with some skepticism; to my surprise, she then started wrapping the dried weeds around the wooden ball. Once the ball was covered, she whipped out a thin stem—a hydrangea branch. That cleared up the mystery of the hole.

Unlike herbs, hydrangeas were purely for show and were, for all intents and purposes, useless. I'd asked Olto to grow them at some point, having obtained the seeds, but as they were of no use to me I'd completely forgotten about their existence. Regardless, it looked like

Olto had continued to take care of the flowers. Now that I had a closer look, I noticed there were several buds sprouting from the branch. Would this cutting perhaps take root and grow as a new plant? The moss ball probably contained a lot of moisture, so I wouldn't be surprised if the branch started flowering.

"Pretty cool stuff."

Sakura began pasting bits of luminous moss onto the ball and infusing it with magic, presumably Plant Heal. Both moss and hydrangea were plants, so it seemed fair to assume that the spell had something to do with extending their life span. I didn't have any issues whatsoever with that, seeing as I had no use for hydrangeas. *Wait a minute, though*—weren't hydrangea flowers *purple*? Would it be possible to make purple weed water with them? If we could, Sakura could potentially paint her crafts different colors than brown... I turned to her and proposed this. Immediately, her face lit up and she nodded, hitting her left palm with her right fist as if to say, *Aha!* She then passed me some hydrangeas, eyes shining expectantly.

"Okay, okay. Gimme a sec."

Sakura smiled as I tossed the flowers into a pot and simmered them over a low heat.

"Hey, looks like the color's seeping out."

Unlike the weed water we made last time, the mixture in the pot was a far cry from brown. Several minutes later, the liquid had taken on a purplish hue, signaling its completion. Other than the color, it wasn't any different from regular weed water.

"There. That good enough?"

"...♪"

Without missing a beat, Sakura dunked the dish she'd made straight into the hydrangea water. I was familiar with the sight—I recalled the first time I'd seen her woodworking process, where she'd dunked a teacup in weed water to dye it brown. We waited for ten minutes, by the end of which the previously unvarnished wooden plate had taken on a purple hue. It wasn't a brilliant, shocking violet, but rather a muted mauve. Lastly, Sakura placed the moss ball on the plate, and the entire process was complete.

Name: Moss Ball (Luminous Moss)

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 8★

Effect: None. For decorative purposes only. Must be watered daily.

"Damn. It's gorgeous."

The round, mossy ball, the sleek hydrangea stem, and the subdued purple plate all complemented each other perfectly. Frankly, I was

impressed by its quality.

“It also glows in the dark, doesn’t it? Since you made it with luminous moss.”

“...♪”

“Wait, did you actually remember what I said? That was ages ago.”

“...!”

Sakura seemed to have remembered the comment I had made about moss balls when we’d first obtained luminous moss, and consequently made this for me. I hadn’t realized you could make it with Woodworking skills, although that made sense, seeing as she’d only used wood and plants. The moss balls I knew usually required soil too, so it was possible that you could make them with other skills as well, such as Pottery and Handcrafting.

“Hey, what do you say we put these up in our barns? One for here and one for the Eastern Town.”

“...♪”

Sakura nodded, evidently pleased by the thought of having her artwork on display. I placed her creation on the table and closed the window to darken the room, and sure enough, the moss ball began glowing faintly.

“Now *that’s* pretty.”

“...♪”

While it was nowhere near bright enough to replace an actual light, its subtle glow was exactly what made it so beautiful. Evidently, Sakura had been hard at work while I was busy experimenting with Selective Breeding, as I found three more moss balls in the barn’s storage box.

“Shall we try selling these at our farm stand too?”

“...♪”

I visited the Farming Guild once more and put in a request to relocate my stand to the Town of Beginnings. *Sorry to anyone who was waiting for more food.*

“Okay, let’s register them right away. What should we call them?”

This *was* Sakura’s creation after all, and I wanted people to be able to tell that from the name.

“Hmm. Okay, how about ‘Moss Ball (Sakura & Co.)’?”

While we were at it, I also updated all the wooden crockery and utensils to include Sakura’s name, such as “Spoon (Sakura & Co.).”

“Kinda sounds like a cool brand name now, don’t you think?”

“...♪”

Sakura beamed, noting her name displayed on the farm stand’s Settings screen. She seemed happy about the change.

“I know. Should we make more purple weed water?”

“...!”

The answer was clear from her vigorous nodding. It looked like we'd have to postpone our trip to the Water Elemental village a bit longer.

“Okay, let's make enough to fill up this bucket then.”

It was an hour before I finished up my tasks and finally headed out. Not that I minded, though, especially since Sakura had made enough purple tableware for all of us. It was funny how having more plates increased my desire to cook.

“Okay, Sakura. You can make more bowls and stuff in your free time, and we'll add those to our farm stand. Purple dishes will probably sell better than brown ones, right?”

“...♪”

At long last, I was finally done with work on the farm.

“All right, let's go to the Water Elemental Gate.”

Before that, however, I planned to stop by Sawyer's place to sell my excess potions.

“Hey there,” I greeted him.

“Oh, hi, Yuto. Here to sell something?” he replied.

“Yup. I'd like to sell these.”

The two of us made small talk while I showed him what I had to offer. Although I'd been fortunate enough to catch him in the Town of Beginnings today, he was apparently more active in Zone Five nowadays. Everyone seemed to be making progress, myself included. Actually, it was probably rude to lump everyone else in with a sore loser like me, seeing as Zone Five was where all the action was happening.

“How does this sound?” Sawyer asked after tallying up the numbers.

“Fine by me. I'll take it.” I nodded at the price.

“Thank you. By the way, I saw people discussing you again online. Is everything okay?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“They said you were selling something unbelievable at your farm stand or something...”

“All I did was sell some food...”

According to what Sawyer had read, a group of ten players or so had bought out my entire stock of food and posted about how good it tasted in the forums. While I was grateful for their patronage, their actions seemed to have received a lot of criticism from other posters.

“That reminds me—several players have reported sightings of you with a new tamed monster. It's a well-established fact by now that you've got another cute humanoid monster now.”

“Oh, that...”

Now, that was something I *had* anticipated. I didn’t blame them; news of cute monsters was always exciting, especially if they were as cute as Fau or Reflet. I was a bit scared of becoming the target of other Tamers’ envy, though... Once Sawyer and I had sealed the deal, I said goodbye to him and headed to the Farming Guild to buy some premium fertilizer. As this item had a purchase limit, I had to check the guild from time to time to see when new stock was available. I had thought that was the last of my to-dos in the Town of Beginnings, but my monsters seemed to have other ideas.

“...!”

“Hm? What’s up, Sakura?”

“...!”

Sakura had suddenly come to a halt, urging me to follow her. She seemed to want to take me somewhere.

“Okay okay, slow down. I’m coming!”

“...!”

Sakura, who hardly ever made a peep about anything, seemed uncharacteristically assertive today. *It must be something really important to her*, I thought as we raced through town behind her.

“H-How far are we going?”

“...!”

Shortly, we arrived at a familiar-looking bridge. That was all the info I needed to know what Sakura wanted.

“You want to visit the Sequoia Dryad?”

“...♪”

Now that I recalled, today was Tree Day—the one day of the week the Sequoia Dryad was able to descend to the altar. I wouldn’t be able to make any new offerings for some time, though, so that fact had completely slipped my mind. Come to think of it, though, the Sequoia Dryad was pretty much like a mother figure to Sakura, as she had been born from the tree I’d propagated from the Lakeside Sequoia Fruit. I could understand why Sakura would want to see her. We decided to visit the altar together, jumping into the canal and opening the door under the bridge. Although we stuck out like a sore thumb, people already knew about this place, so it didn’t really matter if someone saw us or not. The altar was a short walk from the bottom of the stairs. Thankfully, we didn’t encounter any enemies on the way, nor did we get lost.

“Greetings, my child. How wonderful of you to come,” the Dryad beamed, materializing once we arrived at the altar.

“...♪”

The Dryad then approached Sakura, who smiled back at her from beside me. While she seemed elated at receiving a pat on the head, it

still didn't seem like their meeting triggered any sort of event. *Oh well, as long as Sakura's happy... Wait a second.* To my utter amazement, Sakura suddenly started glowing. What was going on? Once the light subsided, I found that my tree nymph had placed something in the palm of my hand.

"H-Hey, this is...a tamed monster's heart!"

"...♪"

Name: Tamed Monster's Heart (Sakura)

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: A tamed monster's heart in crystallized form. Can't be sold or given away.

First Olto, now Sakura. One of my Tamer friends, Ivan, had given me detailed information about tamed monsters' hearts the last time we'd met. As I had guessed initially, it was an item you could obtain once you maxed out your tamed monster's favorability score. Moreover, you could craft a special item by fusing it with some type of gem via Alchemy. In order to do that, your Magical Beasts Guild rank had to be at least 7. I wasn't quite there yet, although I was close to ranking up to the next level. I'd just have to keep at it and complete as many quests as possible.

"Really? For me?"

"...♪"

"Thanks."

I assumed her favorability score had risen now because she was glad to meet the Sequoia Dryad. Now, that was something I couldn't overlook—I made a mental note to visit the altar with Sakura every week. Just then, I detected a noticeable shift in the Dryad's aura. Up until now, she had given off a warm, nurturing vibe, but now she possessed a dignified and otherworldly air, similar to the first time I'd met her.

"Hmm... Sakura, my child. I see that you have been blessed with a kind and caring master."

"...♪"

"Thanks to the bond you share with him, you have managed to overcome many trials, have you not?"

"...!"

"Furthermore, you have birthed a child and become a mother yourself. That is splendid news. As such, I would like to bestow a blessing upon you."

"...!"

Huh? A blessing? Was this some kind of event then? What was going to happen next? The two carried on with their exchange,

oblivious to my antsiness. Faint particles of light seeped out from between the Sequoia Dryad's hands, which she had clasped above Sakura as though in prayer. The light then coalesced into a single large teardrop and fell on Sakura's head. That was the extent of it, though: she didn't look any different, and the Dryad's solemn air had dissipated too. That really *was* it, then.

"Um, what kind of blessing was that?" I asked hesitantly.

"You shall find out when the time comes," the Dryad chuckled.

"And that time would be...?"

"Wait and see."

She seemed to have no intention of divulging any more details. I checked Sakura's stats just in case, but there were no changes whatsoever. *So much for a new title or skill.* It looked like I had no choice but to wait for when "the time" came. That being said, a blessing could only mean good news, or so I hoped. I guessed it would be something to look forward to.

"Until we meet again, dear adventurer."

"Uh, sure. Goodbye."

"Farewell."

"...♪"

The Dryad waved at Sakura before vanishing into thin air. That seemed to conclude today's meeting.

"...Shall we head to the Water Elemental Gate for real this time?"

Honestly, what more could happen?

Three hours later, our party had once again stepped foot in the Water Elementals' dungeon. It'd taken us a while, but we'd finally made it back. Granted, we'd already come here once, and it wasn't *that* far, provided we didn't make any detours on the way.

"Okay, everyone. Our goal today is to catch Fanged Groupers. You guys with me?"

"Mm-mm!"

"Aye!"

"Chirp!"

"Growl!"

"...♪"

"Hum!"

I had to admit, the sight of them forming a neat line and saluting in unison was pretty spectacular. I was also taken aback by how perfectly in sync they were. *Come on, you can't tell me they haven't been practicing in their spare time.* At any rate, it was nice to see them so motivated. My monsters fought courageously against our enemies, regardless of how powerful those enemies were. They actively pursued Pond Turtles with zeal, to say nothing of Deranged Water Elementals.

I was impressed, given that I still freaked out whenever we encountered one of those ogresses. How could I not, though? *I mean, have you seen that face? Not to mention their eerie wails...* They were like something straight out of a horror flick. I was pretty sure many players would find the very sight of them physically repulsive.

We persisted with our efforts, going back and forth between the outer levels of the dungeon and the Undines' village. As gathering nodes took time to respawn once you'd collected something, we weren't able to gather that many items. Still, we were able to catch the Fanged Groupers we were after with relative ease—about twenty in half a day. As a result, we all leveled up significantly.

"Guess this is what it's like to grind."

Oddly, this was probably the first time I'd actually grinded since I started playing. *Would you look at that*—I was finally doing something RPGesque!

In addition to obtaining a new water healing spell, my monsters' fighting abilities improved throughout our endeavors. Bear Bear in particular had learned a new skill called Charge Ramp-Up upon reaching level 20, thereby increasing their overall attack power. This skill enabled them to double the force of their attack on the next turn by charging up their strength. This move worked great against Pond Turtles, as the damage was capable of bypassing their tough outer shells.

Rick, too, experienced a remarkable growth in his stats. Up until now, his HP and MP combined had received +2 per level-up, and his stat total another +2; postevolution, his HP, MP, and stat total now received +3 each per level-up. Gray Squirrels—Rick's initial race—were known in this game as grinding fodder, thanks to their low base stats. On the other hand, that also meant their evolution threshold was lower. Through multiple evolutions, it seemed somewhat possible to bridge the gap between more powerful species.

"Looks like we're pretty much spent."

"Chirp..."

"Growl..."

Our HP and MP had decreased significantly, and we had used up nearly all of our recovery items. The smartest option would be to head back. At the same time, I wanted to take a risk, and push farther into uncharted territory. So far, we'd played it safe and hadn't gone anywhere that we hadn't explored the previous day.

"Gotta take risks every now and then."

I wasn't too worried as I still had my escape orb and flee orb with me, in case we encountered a dangerous foe and needed to get out of the dungeon or disengage from the battle pronto.

"All right, let's move on to the next room. Ready?"

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

Olto and Sakura, who served as our tanks, led the way as we ventured into a new room.

“Whoa, a tree among the ruins. How uncanny.”

The room we were in was unlike the others we’d seen so far. Sizewise, it was more or less the same, but the circular pool in the center set it apart from the rest. A single tree grew from the pool—what appeared to be a mangrove.

“Any enemy— Duh, obviously!” I sighed as a Pond Turtle appeared from behind the tree. Fortunately, there was only one of them. Although Pond Turtles took longer to defeat than Deranged Water Elementals, their blows were weaker, meaning our chances of dying were pretty low. We could easily take one on.

“All together now! Attack!”

“Growl!”

“Chirp!”

Bear Bear and Rick led the group in attacking the turtle. We sustained some damage, but were able to defeat it in the end. For all our struggles, we had gotten pretty used to fighting in this dungeon. Once we had taken care of the turtle, we paused to take a better look at the room we were in.

“Whoa. This place is stunning.”

“Aye.”

“Hum.”

The lush tree in the center of the bluish room looked like something out of a painting, towering above the rest of us. I assessed it with my Appraisal skill and learned that it was called a Dogwood Tree. The name rang a bell.

“So this is what dogwood looks like.”

Apparently, this giant, mangrove-like tree was the very material my staff was made out of. Their name in kanji supposedly came from the fact that they tended to soak up a lot of water and release a ton of watery sap from their branches in spring—hence the pool of water.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl.”

Rick and Bear Bear searched the dogwood tree in earnest, but there didn’t seem to be anything particularly noteworthy. Still, the tree itself made for pretty decent woodworking material, so I decided to use my Logging skill on it.

“All right! Got myself some dogwood!”

It was a shame that there were no fish, though.

“Now then, what’s down this hall— Stop!” I commanded, coming to a halt.

“Mm?”

Phew, that was close. My Water Exploration skill had detected two Pond Turtles inside the next room. Moreover, my range wasn't wide enough to cover the entire area, which meant that there could be even more monsters lurking within that I wasn't aware of. Clearly, the odds were stacked against us.

“Let's call it a day. Time to head back, guys.”

I ended up having to use my flee orb when we encountered two Deranged Water Elementals on our way back, but fortunately, we managed to escape without suffering any casualties. I decided to log out at one of the inns in the Undines' village for today and return to the Eastern Town the following day.

I was a bit out of sorts the next day when I logged back in to the game. To tell the truth, I'd gotten into a bit of a spat with one of my neighbors when I failed to greet her when taking out the trash. Admittedly, I was the one who had started it; when she asked me what I did for a living, I told her curtly, “None of your business.” The old lady had glared at me as though I were some kind of criminal and started ranting about how youngsters these days had no respect whatsoever. I'd managed to cut her off with some half-hearted dismissal, but the encounter had riled me up, and I had a hard time falling back asleep. As a result, what was supposed to be a mere catnap turned into a much longer snooze, and by the time I bolted awake and logged in, it was already noon in-game.

You'll be sorry the next time we meet, old hag! I cursed silently. Not that I planned on doing anything other than ignoring her and making a hasty escape; rocking the boat simply wasn't in my nature. Regardless, I was still positively seething.

“D'aah! Whatever, hugging my monsters will help me forget all the nasty stuff. Everyone, gather 'round!”

“Mm-mm?”

“Hum?”

“That's right. Come to papa.”

“Chirrrp chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

My companions seemed to sense that I was in a bad mood, each of them trying to cheer me up in their own way. Rick offered his tail for me to stroke, and Bear Bear rolled over on their side, baring their stomach. Fau strummed a relaxing tune on her lute while Sakura quietly handed me a cup of herbal tea. All the fluffy sensations, coupled with Fau's soothing music, instantly calmed me down, and I felt the last traces of anger melt away as I sipped on my tea and patted each of my companions in turn. Man, monster therapy really was

something else.

“Whew. Feeling tons better now,” I sighed contentedly.

“...♪”

“La la la...♪”

“Right, what next...? Shall we go tackle the dungeon for a bit?”

I figured I could attempt the Water Elementals’ trial again before returning to the Eastern Town, having logged back in in the Undine village. As if to make up for my misfortune in real life, I found myself on a roll in-game. Most of the enemies I encountered were solo spawns, and I was able to reach the dogwood room that I’d discovered the day before in no time. The cherry on the cake was the water crystal I obtained from one of the Deranged Water Elementals. Honestly, two crystals in three days wasn’t too shabby at all. *The gaming gods must be taking pity on me!* I thought.

Unfortunately, that was where my luck ended. I certainly hadn’t anticipated what happened next.

“Dang... Didn’t think my staff would break.”

Much to my dismay, I had unwittingly broken my precious weapon. The morning’s incident still fresh in my mind, I had used the staff to give a hefty whack to a Fanged Grouper that bore an uncanny resemblance to that meddlesome hag. As luck would have it, my staff caught one of the grouper’s sharp teeth and snapped. Still not fully accustomed to being an active participant in battle, I hadn’t been paying enough attention to my weapon’s Durability stat. Still, it was a shame to lose such an expensive staff. Guess that was it for my exploration for the time being.

“Bummer.”

If the staff had at least 1 Durability remaining, it could still be repaired, but unfortunately, once a weapon was fully broken, that was it. At first, I considered buying a new staff at the village smithy, but on second thought I figured I might as well just make a new one. I was sure I could craft a good, solid weapon with all the materials we’d gathered so far.

“Just as well, since we’ve already used up all our potions.”

While I could still fight without a staff, I wouldn’t be able to protect myself, not to mention how steeply my magical attack power would diminish without it. Given the risks, I didn’t feel safe plowing ahead with our dungeon exploration.

We left the Undines’ village shortly after and embarked on our journey back to the Town of Beginnings. I wasn’t too worried about the enemy spawns on the way; my companions were more than capable of dealing with them. Granted, the battles did take a little longer than usual as we weren’t at our max potential, but we were still able to return to town with relative ease.

“Right, let’s go visit Lewin.”

The reason I’d opted for the Town of Beginnings and not the Eastern Town, which was closer, was because of Lewin. I’d given him a call beforehand, so I knew he would be around.

“Evening.” I greeted him at his stall.

“Good to see ya again. So your staff broke, huh?”

“Yeah... Take a look at this.”

“Dang, ya really did it, eh? Snapped like a twig. So, what’s it gonna be? Premade or custom?”

“I’d like to make one using my own ingredients, if possible.”

“Sure, whatcha got?”

“One sec... Here you go.”

I showed Lewin most of the ingredients I currently owned: various types of wood, water ores, tinstones, monster drops I got from the Water Elementals’ trial, and other miscellaneous items. Lewin’s expression was grave as he scanned the list. I’d never seen someone furrow their brow so deeply before.

“Hey,” Lewin growled.

“Yes?”

“Did you get all these yourself?”

Ah, I knew he’d ask. I’d planned on selling my info to the Quick-Eared Cats anyway, so this was perfect timing. I decided to give it to him right then and there.

“I have some information I’d like to sell, including where I got these from.”

“Hold up. I may be a member of the Cats, but I ain’t a broker myself.”

“Wait, you’re not?” I asked, somewhat taken aback.

“Nope. I’m in the support corps. In exchange for gettin’ first dibs on the latest news, I make weapons and armor for other Cats members or help them with verifyin’ stuff. Buyin’ or sellin’ info ain’t my thing, ya see.”

This was news: I’d been under the impression that all Quick-Eared Cats’ members were information brokers.

“I’ll introduce ya to another clan member. How ’bout that?”

“Oh no, it’s fine. I’m not in a hurry or anything. Do you know when Alyssa will log in next?”

“First thing tomorrow mornin’, I reckon.”

“Got it. I’ll come again tomorrow then.”

“What about these ingredients? Ya gonna sell me the leftovers?”

“Hmm... Sure, why not? I can always get them again some other time.”

“Great! I’ll buy whatever stuff I don’t use and subtract that from the overall cost. That okay with ya?”

“Sounds good. Thank you.”

Continuing the discussion, Lewin asked, “So was it mainly water magic ya wanted to strengthen? Any other attributes you’re usin’?”

“Yep, mainly water. I’ve also started using tree magic. Don’t use my staff for attacking that often, but I do use it to guard myself sometimes.”

“Gotcha. Tree magic, eh...? You *are* a Halfling, I s’pose.”

“Is it doable?”

“Hmm... Can’t say for sure. Tree magic’s pretty rare, so I’ve never tried strengthenin’ it. I’ll give it a shot, but don’t get your hopes up.”

“Got it. That’s all from me.”

“As you wish. Here, I’ll lend ya this for the time being. That should get ya through today.”

“Thanks,” I replied, accepting the Oak Staff Lewin lent me. Weak as it was, it would do as a makeshift weapon—not that I really needed it, given that I was planning to spend the rest of the day doing farm work and cooking since I’d gotten quite a bit of seafood from the Undines’ village.

“But first, the farm.”

“Mm-mm!”

I headed back and started ticking off the items on my Town of Beginnings checklist, such as farming and concocting. Before I moved on to cooking, I decided to check our farm stand’s inventory.

“Let’s see, how many did we...? Whoa! Out of stock? *Again?! Look, Sakura!*”

“...?”

“The crafts you made! They’re completely sold out!”

Although each item was priced fairly low, there had been a large quantity, resulting in a pretty decent sum. All three luminous moss balls were gone too. Upon reviewing the logs, I learned that those had been the first items to sell. My predictions had been spot-on—I had a feeling they would sell, given that they were made from weeds and kindling and only cost 800 G each. I was curious to hear what people thought of Sakura’s masterpiece. That being said, it seemed a shame to continue selling them at this price: I was sure people would be willing to pay much more.

“Gotta be a way to raise the cost of production somehow.”

Since there wasn’t much I could do about weeds, wood seemed like my only other option. If I used a better quality wood such as dogwood instead of mere kindling, I could probably sell the moss balls for a higher price. I made a mental note to do so from next time onwards.

“That’ll have to wait until tomorrow, though. Gonna focus on selling food today.”

As I was preparing to get started on my next task, I spotted a familiar face standing in front of our farm. It looked like she had come to check out my stand. I couldn't for the life of me remember her name, though. Where had I seen her? I was sure I'd met her pretty recently.

"Hey there," I called out to her.

"Hi! Remember me?" The girl smiled cheerfully.

"Just your face, actually."

Better to be honest and admit I don't remember her name. Not that it seemed she expected me to—probably why she'd hesitated to greet me first.

"Oh, no worries. I'm Cerulean. We met in the village in Zone Two."

"Hey, I remember now! You're Tsuyoshi and Takayuki's classmate!"

"Yes, I am. Thank you for your help back then."

Cerulean was incredibly respectful and well-mannered. I could hardly believe she was nearly ten years younger than me; she had to have grown up in an upper-class family or something.

"Anyway, what brings you here today?"

"I'm actually in town to buy one of the wooden decorations that people have been buzzing about on the forums."

"Wooden decoration? Wow, I hadn't heard about that. Where can I get one?" I asked, thinking about Sakura. I figured it would be nice to get her one as long as it wasn't too expensive—she could use it for inspiration.

"..."

"What's wrong?"

"Um, I was talking about *your* stand, Silver-Haired."

"Huh? Wait, did you mean the moss balls? I only started selling them yesterday..."

"Someone posted a photo online right after they bought it. Everyone's been talking about it."

"For real?"

"Yes. People have also been talking about the food you were selling before that. They said, and I quote, 'Silver-Haired's done it again.'"

"Wha...? Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all. They meant it in a good way. I'm sure they were impressed."

"You think so?"

It sure didn't sound like it... Moreover, "done it *again*" implied that others had said the same of me before, right?

"Anyway, I came here as soon as I could to see if I could buy one

too.”

I’d anticipated Sakura’s moss balls would generate some buzz, but certainly not this quickly nor to this extent. I couldn’t mass-produce them yet either, seeing as I only grew luminous moss in small quantities at the moment. I’d have to set a purchase limit on them from now on.

“Sorry, but we’ve sold out already.”

“Aw, shucks! Thought that might be the case. If only I’d been in the Town of Beginnings! Just my luck that I was in the Eastern Town at the time.” Cerulean’s shoulders sagged.

“I’m planning on selling them again, so don’t worry,” I reassured her.

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“Wait, hold up!”

“What is it?”

“Here, you can have this one.”

I decided to give Cerulean the moss ball I’d planned on displaying in our barn in the Eastern Town. After all, we knew each other, and I felt bad for letting her leave empty-handed after having come all this way.

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Uh-huh. I can make another one anytime.”

“Oh wow, thank you! How much?”

“Nah, don’t worry about it.”

“Please, I insist!”

“Fine, 800 G then.”

“That’s it?! W-Well, if you say so.”

Cerulean seemed stunned by the price, but I’d simply charged her the same as I had everyone else.

“Thanks so much! I’ll come again some other time!” She thanked me as she left.

“See you around,” I waved back. *Never thought word would get around that fast.* I had seriously underestimated their impact. They were aesthetically pleasing, though, so I guess it had only been a matter of time. *Get ready, Sakura—you have a lot more work coming your way.*

After teleporting to the Eastern Town and taking care of our chores on that farm, I found myself standing in front of our barrels, eyes narrowed in disbelief.

“Wait. Don’t tell me the soy sauce is ready already?”

“Hum!”

I’d heard that you could make vinegar in two days, but certainly not *soy sauce*! Evidently, Reflet’s Fermentation skills halved the

average brewing time for fermented foods and condiments. I opened the barrels in the barn one by one and discovered that all five barrels—soy sauce, miso, fish sauce, grape vinegar, and natto—were ready. While the quality was only four stars, which was lower than what I could buy in the village, I had now secured a steady supply of the aforementioned items, allowing me to use them freely in my cooking. Upon storing them in my inventory, I found that each barrel yielded thirty bottles or containers of each product. That was far more than I'd anticipated. *What should I make next?* I wondered. *More miso and soy sauce?*

"I can buy those from the village, though. Besides, it doesn't cost any money to travel there, so I can always go if I want something higher qua—Holy *shit!*"

"Hum?!"

"Whoops. Sorry for startling you, Reflet."

"Hum?"

"Nothing... I just realized something pretty groundbreaking."

Now that I remembered, I had a permit that enabled me to travel to the Village of Alf for free from the Eastern Town. From there, I could teleport to the Town of Beginnings, meaning I could travel between towns for free via the village... Realization dawning, I ran to the teleportation circles in the town square. Unsurprisingly, I had no issues teleporting to Alf or the Town of Beginnings. Naturally, Reflet was able to travel with me as well.

"Damn it! How stupid can I be?!"

I'd already paid for our transportation *multiple* times when I could have traveled for free all along. *What a waste of money!*

"Hm? Is that you, Yuto?" a familiar voice addressed me.

"Oh hey, Siegfried. Long time no see."

"It's been a while, hasn't it? Hm, you look like you could use a hand. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just bemoaning my stupidity, that's all."

Siegfried just happened to stroll by as I was beating myself up in front of the teleportation circles in the Town of Beginnings. Ever the white knight, he seemed unable to ignore a person in distress. Once I told him how I'd failed to realize and make use of my travel loophole, he gave me a consoling pat on the shoulder. Reflet patted my thigh in a similar fashion. *What saints!*

"Well, mistakes are part of the process. That's what makes gaming fun, don't you think? You just have to be more careful next time," Siegfried offered sympathetically.

"...Yeah, guess you're right."

"Besides, free travel to Alf only applies to the Town of Beginnings or Zone Three. It's not as if you can keep teleporting for free

infinitely.”

“You can’t?”

“Mhm. I used the free travel hack too, but once I got to Zone Five, I could no longer select Alf as my destination.”

Huh. So there *were* restrictions then. Not that it really mattered to me, as Zone Five was still a long way off in my travel plans.

“Got it. Thanks for letting me know all that.”

“No problem. Glad I could be of some help. So, are you returning to the Eastern Town now?”

“Huh? I am, but...how’d you know that?”

“I was there earlier, and one of my acquaintances kept on asking me if I’d seen you. Looks like people have been talking about you again, Yuto.”

“They *what*?” I spluttered. *Hang on*—that was actually terrifying. Could they be talking about Reflet, though? My monsters were all popular, and Reflet was just as cute as the rest. Frankly, I wouldn’t be surprised if there happened to be a Tamer or two who wanted to see her.

“Hum?”

“Oh well. If anyone asks me about it, I’ll just tell them to wait until I’ve sold my info to the Quick-Eared Cats.”

“Hum.”

After Siegfried departed, flashing his signature princely smile as usual, we began heading back to the Eastern Town. As much as I regretted having wasted so much money, I at least knew a better way to travel between places now. This would make looking after our farms much easier. Once we had taken care of all our chores, I stopped to contemplate our next move.

“Moneywise and XP-wise, the Water Elementals’ trial has the most to offer, but...”

The reason I was hesitant was that tomorrow was Earth Day, when the Earth Elemental Gate was supposed to appear. I was keen on going, especially since I had the necessary crystals to unlock it. I also had a good idea of its approximate location—it was most likely the Stone Circle in the Fanged Forest. As for the remaining gates’ locations, I surmised that the whistling boulder with the hole in it located in the Forest of Talons was the Air Elemental Gate, and the giant lit torch in the Forest of Horns was the Fire Elemental Gate.

In order to unlock the Earth Elemental Gate, however, I had to arrive at the expected point of emergence well in advance. Since I’d logged in quite late, it was already evening. That didn’t leave me with much time to spare. Of course, there was always the option of traveling to the gate first thing tomorrow, but I didn’t want to take any chances. *Better to get there a bit early and wait near the gate instead,*

I concluded.

“Think I’ll go to the Fanged Forest for now.”

When I had purchased information from Alyssa about the Humming Forest, she had given me the lowdown on other areas as well, namely, the locations of the mysterious landmarks found in the Fanged Forest to the north, the Forest of Talons to the west, and the Forest of Horns to the south. In addition, she had filled me in on things to watch out for in each area’s boss battle, being extra meticulous about things that would occur near the objects in question. As grateful as I was, I wasn’t sure what I’d done to deserve such immaculate customer service. In any case, I’d have to thank her properly next time.

“All right, guys. Time to go,” I announced.

“Mm-mm!”

“Hum!”

Although we left the Town of Beginnings in high spirits, our journey was anything but easy. While regular enemies proved no problem for us, our trouble began when we were moments away from clearing the Fanged Forest.

“Brrrrng!”

“Yikes! Let’s get outta here!”

“Growl growl!”

“Chirp chirp chirp!”

“Brrrrng!”

A predator monster—just our luck! These wandering bosses were a nasty piece of work and didn’t scale to player level. The chief predator of the Fanged Forest was an enormous locust resembling a Chinese grasshopper—an aptly named Giant Grasshopper. It was disturbingly realistic in appearance, its mouth especially hair-raising to look upon. Imagine such a creature jumping towards you—it was nothing short of horrifying. I could scarcely believe I’d failed to notice such a conspicuous beast, but I soon understood why: the trees had done an excellent job of concealing it. Not only was its body the same color as the rest of the forest, but it had also been flying above the trees out of my line of sight, making it harder to spot.

“Arrrrrghhh!”

“Aye aye aye!” Fau cheered the rest of us on from her perch on my shoulder.

“BRRRRRRNNGG!”

The Giant Grasshopper was more persistent than I expected, remaining hot on our tails even as we neared the edge of the map.

“There’s gotta be... That’s it!”

There was one way we could lose the creature. In fact, we had successfully escaped a different predator in the exact same manner in

the past.

“Get ready! We’re charging into the boss field!”

“Mm? Mm-mm?”

“Don’t worry, buddy! I was planning on fighting the boss anyway!”

That’s right. Predators could no longer pursue us once we entered a boss battle. We had previously wandered into a boss field by accident while being chased by the predator of the Northern Plains, the Large Rock Ant. I hadn’t realized it at the time, but that had to be one of the reasons that ant had given up the chase.

The boss of the Fanged Forest was a Dagger Wolf, a wolf-type monster with high attack power. Seriously, was the north obsessed with canines or something? The boss of the Northern Plains had been a Savage Dog, after all. Thankfully, they were pretty easy to deal with; a defense-oriented fighting style with an emphasis on dealing status ailments was the way to go. Dagger Wolves were said to be the strongest among all four bosses in Zone Two, and true to their reputation, they were swift and powerful, with a tough exterior to boot. They were obstinate powerhouses relying on pure strength rather than wit. On the other hand, they were extremely susceptible to status ailments such as poison, paralysis, and sleep. Fortunately, my party was well equipped to handle that, plus we had plenty of poison to go around from this morning’s concocting session.

Just as I thought, the grasshopper turned around and hopped away once we set foot in the boss area. It looked like you didn’t have to worry about both a boss and predator monster attacking you at the same time in this game. In what little time we had left until the fight began, I gave Bear Bear a hunter potion and Sakura a paralyzing potion, and set aside some poison for Rick and myself. Although I doubted *I* would be able to deal a direct hit to such a swift opponent, it couldn’t hurt to take extra precautions.

“Grrrr...”

Shortly, a large, reddish-brown wolf appeared in front of us, baring fangs as sharp as daggers. So that was where it got its name from.

“N-Not a big fan of all these dogs, honestly...” I gulped, remembering how I’d been bitten to death by a Wild Dog when I was first starting out. Still, I couldn’t really back down at this point.

“Nowhere to run now. C’mon, let’s get this over with! You *will* protect me, though, won’t you?” I glanced at Olto hopefully.

“Mmm!”

With that, we commenced our battle. I went into the fight naively thinking it would be as easy as defeating the Stone Talus as long as we followed the battle guide. As it turned out, however, I’d

underestimated our opponent.

“Aroooo...”

“Crap! That was close!”

By the time the Dagger Wolf succumbed to poison, only twenty percent of my HP remained. Because I was using a temporary staff and not my usual weapon of choice, my water magic was far less potent than usual, which dragged the battle out for longer than planned, and I ended up taking more damage. Really went to show you the power of having the right equipment. At least no one had died, though. Overall, it was a good learning experience.

After healing myself and Olto—we’d sustained the most damage in the fight—we hurried onwards to the Northern Town. While I was pretty sure we’d be safe after crossing over to Zone Three, I couldn’t relax knowing that a predator could still be nearby. Once again, we passed through a wide-open gate, just as we had when we first entered the Eastern Town.

“So this is the Northern Town. Looks pretty much the same as the Eastern Town.”

“Aye,” Fau murmured in agreement. The only notable difference was that unlike the Eastern Town, which was mostly blue, the Northern Town boasted a yellow color palette. Most of the houses sported yellow roofs, and the rest of the town was also painted with warm colors. Even the flowers in people’s gardens were mostly yellow. After registering the teleportation circles in the square, I decided to take a brief look around town.

“La la la la...”

“Hum-hum.”

“Mm-mm, mm-mm.”

“Growl growl.”

Olto, Reflet, and Bear Bear skipped ahead of us while Rick and Fau—*surprise surprise*—rode on my shoulders. Sakura alone walked beside me, a soft smile playing on her lips. Most of the items sold at shops seemed to be more or less the same as in the Eastern Town too. I was sure there were *some* differences, although none were obvious from a cursory glance. By the time we had made a brief circuit around town, it was time for us to leave.

“Eh, we can explore more later when we have time.”

“Mm!”

“Right now, the Stone Circle’s our number one priority.”

“Growl.”

We left the Northern Town and returned to the Fanged Forest, continuing to our original destination. Although the predator had to be long gone by now, I was still wary as we tiptoed through the forest. The monsters were more powerful at night, but they were nothing we

couldn't handle—a sure sign of our growth. After walking for an hour or so, the Stone Circle gradually came into view.

“Found it! It really is a Stone Circle!”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

True to its name, there were six stone slabs placed in a circle atop a small hill. Each slab was about three meters tall, one meter wide, and roughly thirty centimeters thick. Bathed in moonlight, the monument was ethereal; I half expected to see a flutter of fairies playing and dancing around it. I supposed that image was accurate in a way, with Fau and Rick currently frolicking about together.

“It's almost the next day. Let's wait here.”

“...”

Five minutes later, at midnight on the dot, I finally heard the announcement I'd been waiting for.

“Would you like to offer an earth crystal to the Earth Elemental's Altar?”

“Heck yeah! Thought you'd never ask!”

I was right! I quickly selected “Yes” and was prompted to place my crystal on the altar.

“I'm guessing by ‘altar’ you mean the Stone Circle?”

Unsure of where this “altar” was, I tried placing my crystal in the center of the circle. As it had when I tossed my water crystal into the fountain, a powerful ray of light shot towards the sky. The yellow beam rising from the Stone Circle looked almost like the culmination of some kind of ritual, in fact. No matter how many times I witnessed surreal scenes like this, it never got old. That was one of the reasons I enjoyed this game so much.

Once the light subsided, an enormous stone gate stood before me. Everything so far was eerily similar to the Water Elemental Gate, from this gate's otherworldly appearance to the groan it made as it slid open. Even the server-wide announcement that followed was exactly the same.

“One of the Elemental Gates has been unlocked.”

“As a bonus for unlocking the Earth Elemental Gate, you will be awarded a random skill scroll.”

“Awesome!”

I'd managed to obtain another skill without spending extra bonus points. What sort of skill had I gotten this time?

“Never mind, I can check later. Let's head in for now.”

Whereas the Water Elemental Gate looked like we were separated from the other side by a wall of water, the Earth Elemental Gate was completely dark on the other side. If I had found this gate first, I would no doubt have been more hesitant to enter it. Thankfully, my

experience with the Water Elemental Gate had taught me that things would be perfectly safe.

“Let’s go.”

“Mm-mm!”

Olto clung to my arm as we set foot inside the gate together. For a split second, I felt a strange, clammy sensation as the darkness enveloped us, but it soon passed. We were now on the other side. The spacious entryway was about the same size as the one in the Undines’ secret dwelling place, with similar decor. The only difference was the person who greeted us.

“Welcome, Unlocker of the Gate!”

“Hi.” I greeted the boy whom I presumed to be our guide. He looked exactly like Olto.

“I am the Gnome Chief. We welcome you wholeheartedly.”

While he was indeed a gnome in every respect, he seemed slightly older than Olto, standing about ten centimeters taller than him. His clothes were also much fancier: in addition to his brown shirt covered with peculiar green patterns, he also wore a black overcoat with gold embroidery, like some sort of aristocrat. The crisp stand-up collar gave him a haughty, authoritative look. Other than that, he looked pretty much the same as Olto, right down to his boyish smile.

“Thank you,” I replied respectfully.

“Mmm! Mm-mm! *Mm-mmm!*”

Upon seeing the chief, Olto began squealing excitedly. He then ran up to him and started jumping up and down, trying to get his attention.

“Hey there. I see you have one of my kind with you. I am pleased to see him so well.”

“Mm.” Olto beamed as the Gnome Chief patted him on the head.

“Okay, come this way.”

“Mm-mm!”

The chief beckoned us to follow him. Olto trailed behind him like a shadow, as though he were a child pretending to be a train car. This part was the same as when the Undine Chief had guided us through the Water Elemental Gate. However, the sight that greeted us next was drastically different from the Undines’ village.

Whereas the Water Elementals’ town had an ethereal and romantic feel to it, the gnomes’ village was more rough-hewn. To begin with, the whole place was basically one large cave. Numerous large stalactites hung from the high ceiling, creating an impressive landscape. I was certain that had they been real, they would’ve undoubtedly been designated as a natural monument by the government. Giant, colorful quartz formations far taller than me sprouted haphazardly from the ground, giving the impression that we

were in a crystal forest of sorts. Stone dwellings, stairs, and pathways were built strategically between the enormous crystals. The quartz also served as the cave's light source, illuminating the interior faintly. Where the Water Elementals' town's beauty had been deliberate and thought out, the gnomes' village possessed a beauty that was wild and untamed. Both were utterly breathtaking.

"Dang."

"Mm-mm!"

For some reason, Olto's expression had turned smug after hearing my sigh of wonder. *In case you forgot, buddy, it was your kin that built this place, not you.*



“Welcome to the Earth Elementals’ town. Enjoy your stay.”

After parting ways with the Gnome Chief, we set out to explore the town. Everywhere we looked, there were gnomes who looked exactly like Olto, *mm-mm*ing at one another (chatting?) or busying themselves with work. *Am I in heaven?* I thought to myself. Even I, who should have been immune to Olto’s cuteness by now, was utterly awestruck; if any Olto fans were to visit this place, they would probably squirt blood out of their noses and faint on the spot. I could barely contain my excitement as I wandered through town. I soon discovered that they mostly had the same types of shops as the ones in the Undines’ village, although their products were noticeably different. Additionally, instead of a fishmonger, I happened across an ore shop.

“Whoa, no way. *Iron* ores?”

To my amazement, the stall was selling iron ores. If I wasn’t mistaken, they were supposed to be pretty rare. Or maybe that was no longer the case? It *had* been a while since I’d acquired that information. Still, they couldn’t have lost their value completely yet.

“Today’s my lucky day!”

The household objects on sale were also markedly different from the ones in the Undines’ village. Four of the available items in particular were ones that could be used on my farm: a compost bin that produced mulch, a worm box containing earthworms that raised your farm’s maximum output quality, a farm with a blackout cover that was meant to be installed underground, and a mining machine for home use that produced low-grade ores. Intriguing as they were, I couldn’t afford any of them with my current budget. The first two items cost 30,000 G each, the farm 40,000 G, and the mining device a staggering 60,000 G. It was a pity they were so expensive. Oh well, I was sure if I sold Alyssa what I’d learned about the Earth Elemental Gate, I could afford at least one of them—perhaps even two if I was lucky. I decided to come back to this place later.

“Let’s check out the dungeon then, shall we?”

“Mm-mm!”

Obviously, I didn’t intend on taking any risks. My only weapon was the feeble oak staff that I’d borrowed from Lewin, and it wasn’t as if I had an ample supply of recovery items either.

“Should be fine, though. Still got my escape orb with me in case things go south.”

I merely meant to investigate the dungeon for research, not to fight.

“Oh, that reminds me. Might as well check my skill scroll before we set out.”

What kind of skill could it contain? I opened my gift box eagerly, hoping to find something that would aid us in our exploration.

“Hm? What’s this...? Gem Finder? Never heard of it.”

Was it some kind of Mining skill? I did a quick search online and came across a player who’d acquired it during the beta test. According to them, it was a passive skill that gave you a slight chance of finding gem-type items while mining. However, given that its success rate was extremely low, most people considered it a trash skill of sorts. Still, it seemed like it could be useful in the long run. Since I planned on doing quite a bit of mining, it was bound to activate at some point. *Like they say, good things come to those who wait.*

Both times now, I had obtained skills that seemed related to that gate’s element—Water Exploration for the Water Elemental Gate and Gem Finder for the Earth Elemental Gate. Did that mean the remaining two gates’ skill scrolls would have something to do with fire and air? I was curious to find out. The Fire Elemental Gate had already been unlocked by somebody else, though, so I’d have to try my luck with the Air Elemental Gate. Unfortunately, I didn’t own any air crystals. *But never mind that*—my current priority was to explore the dungeon.

Steeling ourselves, we ventured inside the Earth Elementals’ trial. The cavern walls of the dungeon had dozens of crystals embedded in them casting a dim light on the passage. Although I tried my best to remove the crystals from the walls, they didn’t so much as budge. The walls seemed indestructible; all I managed to achieve was to pointlessly whittle down the durability of my ice ax.

“Doesn’t seem to be anything here. Let’s move on.”

“Mm-mm!”

I rounded up everyone else, ready to proceed to the next room, but for some reason, Olto refused to move.

“What’s up, buddy?”

“Mmm.” He wrinkled his forehead, one ear pressed against the wall intently. The next instant, he began striking at it with his hoe.

“Wah? You can dig into the walls, Olto?”

“Mmm!”

Not all of the walls were mineable; Olto had apparently discovered a hidden room. I had to hand it to him. Gnomes truly were experts when it came to anything soil- or mining-related.

“Mm-mm, mm-mm!” Olto hummed as he chipped away at the spot on the dungeon wall, which I’d previously thought to be indestructible. After three minutes of hard work, the wall now had a sizable hole in it, revealing a space the size of a tiny bedroom. I could also see a treasure chest inside. It didn’t seem to be booby-trapped, so I placed my hand in the hole and opened it. The chest contained the

following accessory:

Name: Night Vision Necklace

Rarity: 3 / Quality: 9★ / Durability: 200

Effect: Defense +4. Grants Night Vision bonuses.

Weight: 1

As I suspected, the loot boxes hidden in the first room seemed to contain items that could potentially assist you in clearing the dungeon. I put on the necklace right away, and my vision instantly improved. I could now see inside the dungeon as clear as daylight. While it hadn't been terribly dark thanks to the plentiful luminous moss and glowing quartz, I now realized how much darker it was compared to outside.

"This is great! Good job finding such an amazing item, buddy!"

"Mm-mm!"

With this necklace, I'd be able to detect enemies even from afar. Olto led the way while the rest of us followed in good cheer. As I had expected, we encountered a monster in the second room.

"Let's see... First up, a Deranged Earth Elemental."

Why did Deranged Elementals have to be so *terrifying*, though?

"Eep, that's scary." I gulped.

"Mm."

The creature had the body of a child, but its face was horrific. In contrast to the Deranged Water Elemental, which had more of a Japanese horror vibe to it, the Deranged Earth Elemental resembled a certain serial-killer doll from a vintage American flick. Personally, I found the latter more unnerving—in my opinion, Chucky was way scarier than Sadako. Thanks to my night vision necklace, its creepiness was toned down somewhat, but I probably would've had a heart attack had I bumped into it in the dark, especially if I hadn't seen a deranged monster before. Thank goodness for Olto's treasure senses.

"Sic 'em, guys! And be careful of pitfalls!"

I remembered Alyssa telling me that gnomes were highly troublesome opponents, particularly if you were encountering them for the first time. If I remembered correctly, she'd also told me that the pitfalls they dug were undetectable. Sure enough, we fell right into the Elemental's trap while fighting—at least, *I* did, anyway. Thankfully, Olto and Reflet were able to pull me out, and we succeeded in defeating the monster in the end. Due to its weaknesses being water and tree magic, we had a much easier time dealing damage to it than we had to the Water Elementals. Furthermore, Olto was resistant to earth magic, which lessened our overall damage significantly. Taking all of the above into account, Earth Elementals

was a far more compatible enemy for our party.

“Phew, glad we made it. That was close.”

“Mm-mm.”

“Hum.”

“Thanks for saving me, you two,” I thanked Reflet and Olto. I then began searching the room. After a careful scan, I found some cruzshrooms tucked away in the corner. If I didn’t have Night Vision, I probably would never have been able to discover items or mining nodes, given how dark the dungeon was. I hadn’t realized how much of a problem that could be until I almost tripped, not able to see where I was going. In fact, I probably *would* have if Olto hadn’t been there to steady me.

Fortunately, that was our only near accident, and we soon arrived at the next room, where a giant snake, roughly four meters in length, awaited us in the shadows. If I were to encounter a snake that size in real life, I would probably piss myself. As far as LJO monsters went, though, this was still on the small side; at present, the largest snake that had been confirmed so far was a field boss about ten meters long.

“A Stone Snake, eh?”

“*Hissss!*”

“Might be poisonous since it’s a snake monster. Be careful, everyone.”

“Growl growl!”

“Mm-mm!”

I’d anticipated our battle to be intense, but the fight was over in the blink of an eye. Despite its swiftness and high attack stats, the snake’s HP and defense were startlingly low. It was even easier to beat than the Pond Turtles we’d encountered in the Water Elementals’ trial—yet more proof that we were better suited for this dungeon.

“Good work, guys.”

“Mm!”

“Hum!”

Reflet and Olto beamed and gave me a thumbs-up, ever the reliable munchkins.

“Now, what can we find h— Hey, a mining node!”

“Mmm!”

“All right! Let’s get digging.”

There was an obvious crack in the wall where a mining point was located. Given that there was an ore shop in the village, I was excited to see what we could find. Together, Olto and I began chipping away at the spot.

“Hngh! Hup!”

“Mm-mm! Mm-mmm!”

“Let’s see... Iron ores! I knew it! Found some earth ores too.”

Both items were extremely valuable. The fact that we were able to obtain them without having to go too deep into the cave was just icing on the cake. It made sense that we'd have an easier time mining in an earth-type dungeon.

"In the Water Elementals' trial, all of the rooms had canals that were connected to each other. Wouldn't be surprised if the Earth Elementals' trial had some sort of gimmick too..."

My monsters and I embarked on a thorough search of the room. After some time, Olto hit the jackpot.

"Mm-mm, mm-mm."

"So there was a hidden passage—or room. Attaboy, Olto!"

"Mm-mm-mm!"

Olto started swinging his hoe at the wall again, just as he had when he found the loot box. After a minute or so of digging, a narrow passage emerged beyond the hole. I was wrong: it hadn't been a room after all. The passage was ridiculously narrow, and the ceiling just as low. I figured Olto could just about fit. If I were to walk down it, I would have to stoop really low or go down on all fours.

"My monsters could probably squeeze in, but..."

I would probably struggle and only be able to stay there for a limited time. If we ran into a monster, I'd most likely die defenseless. We were bound to have a hard time surviving even if we split our party into two, due to the resulting lack of fighting power.

"Guess that's out of the question for now. Maybe later."

We gave up on the hidden passage and continued with our journey. The next room was incredibly dark, with very few lights. If it hadn't been for my necklace, I wouldn't have been able to see it all.

"Chirp?"

"Hum?"

Rick and Reflet began scanning the room warily.

"Wait! There's something in here!"

I stopped them, suddenly realizing the danger we were in.

I had spotted a Deranged Earth Elemental in the corner of the room. What was more, there was an unfamiliar monster dangling from the ceiling opposite it. It appeared to be some kind of bat: a Dark Bat, to be precise.

"Screech!"

"Fau! Use your Fire Summoning skill to light up the place!"

"Aye!"

"Sakura, concentrate on the bat!"

"...!"

"Watch out for the elemental's pitfalls!"

The bat turned out to be a tricky opponent. Not only were its movements irregular, making it hard to get in a clean hit, but it was

also capable of blending into the darkness. Olto and I were the only ones able to see it, having to point it out to the others each time they lost track of its position. The only saving grace was that it wasn't a heavy damage-dealer, relying mainly on flyby attacks.

More dangerously, the Dark Bat had made us forget about the Deranged Earth Elemental. I was so focused on informing everyone of the former's whereabouts that I'd neglected to pay attention to the latter; only when I got showered by pebbles did I realize it had snuck up behind us. While we managed to avoid respawning, it was a close call.

"Was worth the trouble, though."

"Mmm!"

There was not one, but two mining nodes in the room. Naturally, they, too, contained earth and iron ores. If a low-level player like me could find this many ores, an advanced player was bound to dig up even more, and higher-quality ones at that. This dungeon could well be a dream come true for blacksmiths. I decided to push on despite running low on fuel. Frankly, I was a bit blinded by greed—I was willing to admit that much.

"Oh crap! Attack, attack! Ramp it up, everyone! No holding back!"

Again we almost died. As luck would have it, we ran into a unique Earth Elemental specimen. It pelted us with a shower of pebbles, depleting our strength tremendously. I now knew that unique specimens preferred to attack us all at once rather than individually. Worse still, I'd failed to tame it. A shame, as I wouldn't have minded having another gnome—if anything, I would've *loved* one. Unfortunately, there had been no time to tame it; defeating it was our only option. If I'd dared hold back even a little, we would all have ended up dead.

I wasn't disappointed, though. Quite the opposite, actually: I was ecstatic. After all, I'd obtained another earth crystal. Unique monsters always left behind rare drops on defeat. This rule applied to other monsters as well, not just Deranged Elementals. In the case of gnomes, this meant earth crystals. I couldn't stop grinning at my luck. After all, I'd regained the crystal I used to open the gate and thus gotten my money's worth, so to speak.

"Hmm. I'm almost out of potions. What should I do...?"

As I was debating whether to keep going or head back, I heard the sound of a phone ringing near my ear. Someone appeared to be calling me.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Yoo-hoo. It's your girl, Alyssa. Lewin told me you wanted to sell something?"

“Yeah, I do actually.”

“Great! Why don’t you come visit if you have time then? I’ll be in the Eastern Town today. I can go to the Town of Beginnings if that’s more convenient, though.”

The timing couldn’t have been better. Now seemed like a good place to end our exploration.

“Nah, the Eastern Town’s fine by me. I’ll leave now. Be there in an hour or so.”

“Roger that. See you soon.”

“Thanks. See you in a bit.”

“Sure thing. Looking forward to your report.”

First things first, I had to escape the dungeon. That was easy enough, as none of the monsters had respawned yet, and we managed to get out without having to fight any enemies. Incidentally, I discovered that I’d obtained an extra green jade while taking stock of my inventory. At first, I thought it was because of my Gem Finder skill, but it seemed to be a bonus from the hidden treasure chest. First the blue jade in the Undines’ village, and now a green one. Before leaving the Earth Elementals’ town, I took one last look at the shops.

“Gotta check out their offerings before heading to Alyssa’s.”

Seeing as I didn’t have enough money anyway, I hadn’t bothered looking at any other stalls beside the household-objects store and ore shop. If I was going to sell info about the town, though, it seemed better to have an accurate grasp of what each store had to offer. All of the farming-related items looked great, and everywhere I looked, I found something I wanted. Once I got to the tool shop, however, I sunk to my knees.

“No way...”

The store sold the exact same watering can and hoe that I’d purchased in the Undines’ village. To my utter dismay, these were slightly better quality, despite being the same price.

“If I’d known, I would’ve bought them here! Not to mention...” I trailed off, staring at the other item that had caught my interest. There was an even better hoe on sale—one that was made with earth crystals—for 30,000 G. I was determined to buy that too once I’d sold Alyssa my information, even if it meant my current hoe would go to waste.

“Guess I shouldn’t have bought that one, huh...”

“Mm-mm.”

“You cheering me up, bud?”

“Mm.” Olto patted my thigh sympathetically. He was always cheering me up whenever I made a blunder. How lucky was I to have such a caring companion?

“Mm,” he repeated.

“You’re right. Instead of moping around, I should view this as a learning experience.”

“Mm-mm!”

“Okay, let’s get going. Alyssa’s waiting for us.”

“Mmm!”

Online Forum [We Love to Cook] A Thread for All Things Cooking-Related, Part 2

Together, let's spread the joy of cooking. Anyone can be a top chef!

Wanted: Info about ingredients.

Don't forget to share your recipes!

Cooking fails are also welcome.

449: Asuka

Not much luck with Brewing yet, huh?

450: Ishida

Been doing a lot of experimenting, but haven't gotten anywhere near as good as the stuff you can get from Alf. Best I've managed so far is a miserable three stars. Not sure if it'll be useful, but I'll leave the recipe below just in case.

Ingredients: soybeans (quality: 8★), purified water (quality: 8★), seaweed salt (quality: 7★)

I even used the most expensive brewing barrel you can get from the Eastern Town. Cost me almost 100K altogether, and this is what I get...? *cries*

451: Momma

F... My condolences, dude. All that for a three-star rating, huh? Might be some underlying issue.

452: Usami

You guys discussing Brewing? Perfect.

After countless visits to Alf, I finally got Knut to share her Brewing tips with me!

453: Asuka

You did? That's amazing. I gave up a long time ago.

454: Energie

May I ask why? Is it really that hard to get her to talk to you?

455: Ishida

The way it works is that even if your server completely wrecked their village—aka Alf—you can still access an intact version of it post-event. However, there's a stark contrast in villagers' attitudes towards players depending on whether you're from a server that let the village get destroyed or a server that was able to save it. The difference is painfully obvious when you interact with them.

456: Usami

Our village was totally annihilated, so Knut, the farmer who sells miso and soy sauce, was icy cold towards me. Glacial, even.

457: Asuka

Same. She was still willing to sell me stuff, though, so I didn't bother doing anything about it.

458: Usami

It took a lot of sweet-talking, errand-running, and gift-giving, but I *finally* got her to treat me like a normal human being!

Gosh, you should've seen the moment her frosty expression melted into a smile! It seriously made me question my sexuality.

459: Ishida

Just be careful you don't do anything to make her hate you again.

Anyway, what kinda info did you get from her?

460: Usami

Well for one, in addition to the Brewing, she also has Fermentation skills.

She said she makes her miso and soy sauce in fermenting barrels.

461: Ishida

Say what?

Fermenting barrels? Not brewing barrels?

462: Usami

Exactly! Apparently, Fermentation is a higher-level skill derived from Brewing. Without it, you can't use fermenting barrels.

Also, believe it or not, you can buy those barrels

in the Town of Beginnings.

463: Energie

Then, there never was any chance of success with a brewing barrel...

464: Asuka

Shh! Not another word!

465: Momma

Don't rub salt into Ishida's wounds!

466: Ishida

I...it's fine. This is just the sort of thing that happens when you're a crafter.

Trial and error, baby! Failure is a stepping-stone to success!

Anyway, I'm not disappointed at *all*, you hear me?!

467: Asuka

Mhm, of course you aren't. I'm sure this lesson will come in handy someday.

That being said, I plan to continue buying my miso and soy sauce from Alf for the foreseeable future.

468: Usami

Don't worry. Your day will come eventually.

Glad I stocked up on those.

469: Momma

Eh, I don't even have Brewing skills

470: Energie

Good luck! You'll make up for your loss soon enough. I'm sure of it!

471: Ishida

DAMN YOU ALL!!!!!!

Online Forum [What's New?] A Discussion Thread for Stuff That's Been Newly Added to the Official Version, Part 11

Don't try to pass off unverified information as facts.
State the source of your information as clearly as possible.
Be courteous to one another.

107: Sakkyun

New skill alert!

108: Sukegawa

Ooh, what kinda skill?

109: Sakkyun

Fermentation!

110: Shiro

Wasn't there something similar already?

111: Sukegawa

That'd be Brewing, I think. How're they different, though?

They both sound the same to me.

112: Sakkyun

Seems like Fermentation is a higher-level skill derived from Brewing. Still not sure what differentiates it from the latter.

Apparently, there's this bean farmer in Alf who sells high-quality miso. If you manage to befriend her and ask her for the recipe, she'll tell you that you need Fermentation and a fermenting barrel.

113: Sukegawa

Hey, that actually sounds familiar!

I remember Silver-Haired saying something like that during the event.

Think it was when he was explaining to the players

with Cooking skills where they could get miso from.

114: Soldato

And you know this because...?

115: Sukegawa

We were assigned to the same server, duh.

We blacksmiths happened to be working next to the chefs, so I just happened to overhear their conversation.

Just so you know, I wasn't eavesdropping just because they were mostly cute girls or anything.

116: Sakkyun

Whatever, bro. As long as you don't get too carried away.

117: Sukegawa

Hmm... Wait a sec. IIRC, they were talking about *Brewing* then, not Fermentation.

Pretty sure their conversation went something like this:

Silver-Haired: "According to the bean farmer, you can make miso by fermenting beans in a barrel."

Chef A: "Come to think of it, I heard there's a Brewer in Zone Three too."

Silver-Haired: "Really? Huh, good to know. Guess that means we can still get miso even after the event ends."

Yeah, that was the gist of it. Could've sworn they carried on talking about Brewing and brewing barrels...

118: Sakkyun

My guess is:

1. Silver-Haired learned about Fermentation from Knut
2. He then informed everyone that you're supposed to ferment stuff in barrels
3. Unfortunately, no one knew about Fermentation, so they simply assumed he was talking about brewing barrels
4. Silver-Haired also confused the two for one another, or he just didn't think what he'd learned was that big of a deal

If only he'd corrected everyone that it was Fermentation and not Brewing that he was talking about, people might have learned about its existence sooner.

119: Shiro

I don't blame him. Seems easy enough to mistake the two if you've never heard of either skill before. Pretty sure I would've gotten the two mixed up myself lol

120: Cerulean

I *think* there's a subtle difference between brewing and fermentation IRL...?
Guess there's no point analyzing it too deeply, though.

121: Sukegawa

Yeah. There are loads of things in this game that are different from real life if you think about it—especially when it comes to crafting.

I mean, forging weapons in thirty minutes?
Seriously?

Not to mention the ratio of tinstone to copper for making bronze is waaay off.

122: Cerulean

Mhm. Just like how you can concoct potions by just mixing ingredients together.

I was looking up agricultural skills since I was curious, and apparently, there's a skill called Hydroponics that was discovered in beta. You need it for growing rice.

In real life, hydroponics refers to a method of growing crops without soil, but in LJO, it's used to grow stuff like rice and lotus roots. Based on that, I think it refers to any kind of cultivation process that requires water in-game.

123: Sakkyun

Someone apparently complained about Hydroponics not matching the actual definition of the word.

124: Sukegawa

Yeah, some people are like that.

Imagine not being able to tell the difference between gaming and real life.

Weren't the devs pretty strict about that kinda stuff, though?

125: Soldato

They have a firm stance, that's for sure. Essentially, their message is take it or leave it. But you know, it's clearly laid out in the TOS at the start that "this game is purely fictional, so keep in mind that some things may deviate from reality."

126: Shiro

Wait, you actually read the whole TOS?

127: Soldato

Obviously. And you haven't?

128: Sukegawa

LMAO of course not

129: Soldato

I mean, sure, it's long, but it's also pretty interesting, you know?

130: Sukegawa

Yikes. Check out this weirdo.

131: Soldato

ajkshwdklj says the player who goes by the name lewd blacksmith

Anyway, as I was saying

The devs basically told the player something along the lines of "Don't confuse LJO for reality. If you don't like what we have to offer, feel free to quit. Also, strictly speaking, Fermentation isn't just the 'upgraded' version of Brewing. There's another separate skill called Brewing (Advanced)," etc.

132: Cerulean

Good job

133: Shiro

You mean the devs, or...?

134: Cerulean

Both, I guess?

Kudos to the devs for standing their ground, as well as the player who sacrificed themself to obtain info from them.

135: Soldato

That's exactly it. Pretty unusual for the devs to give out information like this.
Gotta thank the self-proclaimed expert for that lolol

136: Sakkyun

Guess the difference between Brewing and Fermentation is similar to that of Farming and Arboriculture.

Speaking of Arboriculture, which got its fifteen minutes of fame from the Silver-Haired Effect, apparently someone managed to obtain it from a random skill box.

Sadly, that person was a Summoner ROTFL
They were obviously upset since they had no way of using it, and Farmers were upset because that player had beaten them to it.

137: Shiro

F for both of them.

Arboriculture lets you grow trees, right?

I can see why it wouldn't be useful for non-Farmers.

138: Sakkyun

That's not all it does, though.

Looks like it lets you use other Farming skills too, like Propagation.

My guess is if you switch from Farming to Farming (Advanced), you gain forward compatibility.

Selecting Arboriculture, which is a less effective agricultural skill than Farming (Advanced), lets you grow trees, though. It's also at least more potent than regular basic Farming skills.

139: Cerulean

Wait, can you only choose one?

Does that mean you have to give up on the other skill forever?

140: Sukegawa

Not at all. You can always obtain the other derivative skill later by using your skill points.
When I made the switch from Smithing to Smithing (Advanced), the skill I didn't choose, Magisteel Smithing, remained on my list of obtainable skills.
You do need twenty points for it, though, so it'll be a while before I can get it.

141: Shiro

Twenty? Dang, that's rough.

Is it like that for other skills too?

Crap. Better stop spending and start saving up.

142: Cerulean

Ditto.

That's really gonna stall my stat-building progress, though...

Just when I'd finally gotten strong enough to no longer get wiped out in a single blow...

143: Sakkyun

That's always gonna be an issue for us crafter-types, eh?

Maybe you should just give up on fighting, like Silver-Haired XD

144: Cerulean

As much as I admire him, I don't know if I wanna copy him.

Correction: I doubt *anyone* can copy his style.

145: Soldato

Idiot! Quit allocating your stats like a coward and be a man!

146: Cerulean

Actually, I'm a girl, so call me a coward all you want. I'll refrain from using points for my stats from now on, though, and start saving them instead.

147: Sukegawa

Come to my shop then!

You can easily make up for your less-than-stellar defenses with the right armor!

I'll tailor-make it for you AND throw in a special discount!

148: Sakkyun

Hey, lewdsmith. Watch it.

149: Shiro

Tailor-made...involves measurements...

150: Sukegawa

What? Hey! I wasn't thinking that at all!

My intentions are pure, I swear!

151: Cerulean

...Really? So you're proposing this purely out of the goodness of your heart?

152: Soldato

Yo, lewdsmith

153: Sukegawa

I won't deny that I love women, but I only have inappropriate thoughts *sometimes* during work! Besides, I'd be banned for life if I tried anything that stupid!

I CAN'T do anything, even if I wanted to! Curse this game!

154: Sakkyun

dkjhkjghf revealing your true colors I see

155: Cerulean

I think I'll go check out Shuella's place.

156: Sukegawa

Nooo! Another precious female customer slipping through my fingers...

157: Soldato

Seriously, dude, be careful with what you say. Might be too late at this point, though XDDD

Chapter Five: Silver-Haired and the Quick-Eared Cats

“Huh? Who, or what, is that? Is it a monster?” As we made our way back from the Earth Elemental Gate, I halted, just in front of our farm in the Town of Beginnings.

“This *is* my farm, right?”

There was no doubt about it; this was the same farm my companions tended to so carefully each day. For some reason, there was now an unfamiliar “creature” on it. The reason I put “creature” in air quotes was because I wasn’t sure whether it was one. It kind of looked like a plant, but...

“Triii.”

It didn’t seem to bear me any ill will, chirping adorably as it clung to my leg. I was at a loss as to how to describe its appearance, though. Whereas Sakura was clad in an outfit adorned with decorative plants, this creature’s very *body* seemed to be composed of various plant parts. If Pinocchio had been made out of twigs and leaves, he would most likely have looked like this. It was a bipedal ball-jointed doll made of brown wood, with leafy, cabbage-like parts for its head, torso, hands, and legs, and a long nose like Pinocchio. It was also incredibly petite, scarcely more than eighty centimeters tall.

“Triii!”

The leaf puppet gazed up at me, eyes twinkling innocently. According to my Appraisal skill, the creature before me was an “Olive Treant (Clone).”

“Wait, you’re an Olive Treant?”

“Tri-triii!!!”

The clone suddenly bounded away, evidently headed towards the spot we had planted the Olive Treant sapling. Unbeknownst to me, the Treant had undergone a massive growth spurt in the span of twenty-four hours. Just the day before, it had been a tiny, one-meter-tall shrub; now, it was a full-grown tree nearing three meters in height. This was almost exactly the same as when Sakura was born.

“Triii.”

“Hey, wait u— Huh? Where’d it go?”

Without warning, the clone charged at the tree and disappeared into the trunk. Shortly, I received an announcement prompting me to name it.

“G-Got it, names first. Heh heh heh, I actually gave this a lot of thought in case I had to name my Olive Treant. I hereby dub you Olea!”

Granted, I’d simply named it after the olive’s botanical name, *Olea europaea*, but I didn’t think it sounded too bad. *If you think it sucks, well, too bad—what’s done is done.*

Name: Olea / Race: Olive Treant / Base Level: Lv. 1
Master: Yuto
HP: 8/8 / MP: 30/30
Strength: 8 / Endurance: 8 / Agility: 2
Dexterity: 8 / Intelligence: 6 / Sanity: 2
Skills: Propagation, Photosynthesis, Tree Spirit Cloning, Noncombatant, Ingredient Production, Farm Management
Equipment: None

Most of the skills were unfamiliar to me. As I was pondering over them, the small, childlike puppet materialized before me again, this time accompanied by another one. The creatures were named “Olea (Clone 1)” and “Olea (Clone 2),” respectively.

Name: Olea (Clone 1) / Race: Olive Treant / Base Level: Lv. 1
Master: Yuto
HP: 2/2 / MP: 7/7
Strength: 2 / Endurance: 2 / Agility: 1
Dexterity: 2 / Intelligence: 2 / Sanity: 1
Skills: Propagation, Noncombatant, Ingredient Production, Farm Management
Equipment: None

Both Clones 1 and 2 shared the exact same stats. However, their ability scores were significantly lower than their original template, and moreover, they lacked Photosynthesis and Tree Spirit Cloning. As the name suggested, Tree Spirit Cloning appeared to allow Olea to produce multiple clones of itself. From its Noncombatant and Farm Management skills, it seemed to be a monster that was meant to be stationed on farms and oversee farming activities. I found its cloning skill fascinating—no doubt it would ensure we had plenty of farmhands. From head to toe it was a monster specialized in looking after farms.

The only skill that still mystified me was Ingredient Production. “What does this skill do?” I asked.

“Triii!”

Olea’s clone responded by motioning me to check my inventory. I discovered the following items in my arsenal: three Olive Treant fruits, one Olive Treant branch, and one Tree Spirit’s Sacred Branch. These were all drops obtainable from Olive Treants. Apparently, Ingredient Production allowed Olea to produce Olive Treant items on a regular basis.

“Thanks, pal.”

Since its original form was just an ordinary tree, I wasn’t sure which one of them I was supposed to praise. In the end, I settled for patting Olea’s trunk, to which it replied by rustling its leaves buoyantly.

“Triii♪”

Judging by the clones’ cheery reactions, it seemed they were directly connected to their host.

“Guess I’ll have to add a few more things to my list of info nuggets to buy from Alyssa. Just as well, though—I was about to go see her anyway. Can you come with me, Olea?” I turned to one of the clones.

“Triii...” it chirped sadly. Like its host, it seemed it was bound to the farm. The clones were but mere copies, incapable of independent range.

“Gotcha. I gotta go now, but look after the farm for me with the others, okay?”

“Triii!”

“Be nice to our new buddies, guys.”

“Mm-mm!”

“...♪”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

My other monsters began dancing in a circle around Olea the tree, along with its two clones. Naturally, their dance was accompanied by Fau’s music. This welcoming ceremony seemed to be becoming a tradition in our household, each celebratory jig livelier than the last. Olea and its clones seemed to be enjoying themselves too. At this rate, they were sure to fit in with us in no time.

“Ready to go to the Eastern Town, Reflet?”

“Hum!”

Together, we set off for the Eastern Town. I was practically bursting with excitement for all the new findings I wanted to discuss with Alyssa.

“Hum-hum-hum♪”

“You excited too, Reflet?” I asked, glancing at her as she skipped merrily beside me. I knew her cheeriness had more to do with the fact that we were out and about visiting different places. Fau’s love of

humming also seemed to be rubbing off on her. *Who knows, she might eventually acquire singing skills*—or perhaps that was just wishful thinking. Before we knew it, we had arrived at Alyssa's stall.

"Hi," I greeted her.

"Heya. I see you've finally made it to Zone Three." She grinned.

"Yeah, finally. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"I know, right?! I was actually up all night taking care of some business in the real world, and I just got home."

"Seriously? And you just logged on straight away?"

Didn't she need to sleep, though? Not that I was one to talk, but...

"Eh, don't worry about it. Gaming gives me all the energy I need."

"Well...okay. I kinda get that, I guess."

Now *that* I could definitely relate to. No matter how tired I was, I'd immediately get a rush of adrenaline and bolt awake as soon as I started playing games. Even if I were ill and stuck in bed with the flu, gaming would be the one activity I'd have no trouble doing.

"I knew you would. So, what is it you wanna sell? I'm so excited to see you here I could just die!"

"Whoa, hold up. Don't get your hopes *that* high."

"I mean, this is *you* we're talking about. Of course I'm stoked. Did you run into the final boss or something?"

The final boss? Now that was just ridiculous. On second thought, she was probably just being nice since I was a regular. Still, I had to admit it felt good to receive such high praise. *Damn it!* She sure was good at getting what she wanted!

"Aw shucks, you flatter me."

"You're confident about your findings, though, aren't you?"

"Well, I won't deny that I am. How did you know?"

Alyssa chuckled. "How many times have we done business now? The look on your face says it all."

"You got me..."

"Just kidding. I got the hint from your new cutie. That alone tells me you've no doubt made some mind-blowing discovery. Go on—I'm waiting for you to drop a massive bomb on me."

For someone waiting to receive shocking news, she sure sounded happy. I supposed it was in her nature as a broker to be ravenous for any new information.

"Oh, make sure you use voice chat," Alyssa requested.

"Right. Almost forgot we had that function."

Voice chat was an in-game function that allowed players to hold a private conversation. The only person who would be able to hear what you said was the player you were currently talking to.

"But when I told you about Fau last time, you just asked me to whisper. Couldn't we have discussed it over voice chat then?"

“That was a teaser.”

“A teaser?”

“Yup. I wanted our conversation to be just barely audible to ‘build up the suspense,’ so to speak.”

Build up the suspense? For whom? Me? I didn’t really get what she was hinting at, but whatever.

“Okay,” I began, clearing my throat. “So, remember the server-wide announcement from the other day about an Elemental Gate?”

“Mhm. Speaking of, I have some exciting news about it too.”

Now that I remembered, I did receive a message from her about it.

“In that case, you might already know about this then.”

“Now, now, don’t go jumping to conclusions yet,” she said. “Let’s hear what you have to say first. Where was it?”

“In Zone Two.”

“I take it my map came in handy?”

“Yes, very.”

“Whew, I’m so glad I gave you that info. So, what do you have for me? Shoot.”

“Right. So, the thing is...”

First, I told Alyssa everything I knew about the Water Elemental Gate, starting with how I was instructed to throw my water crystal into the fountain, which caused the gate to appear. I then recounted how I discovered the Undines’ secret dwelling place within, as well as the various items I was able to buy in the village. Additionally, I told her about the Water Elementals’ trial and the types of monsters to expect inside, as well as how the dungeon was filled with interconnected waterways and various loot boxes.

“Anyway, this is Reflet. She’s a unique Undine specimen. Here are her stats and the items I obtained in the dungeon.”

“...”

“And get this—I even got a few drops from Deranged Water Elementals and some water crystals. Guessing that’s a pretty significant discovery?”

“...”

Hmm. This wasn’t exactly the reaction I was hoping for. Could it be that she already knew about all this? If so, I sounded like a total idiot, gushing about information that was common knowledge as though I were some kind of pioneer. It was too late to back down now, though. Undeterred, I continued my story, making sure to provide some screenshots as proof. However, the other end of the line remained as silent as ever, even after I’d concluded my report.

“Um, Alyssa?”

“...”

“Did we get cut off?”

“...Yuto.”

“Oh good, you’re still there. Yes?”

“How could you...?”

Alyssa’s expression terrified me. So this *was* stuff she already knew! My findings were utterly worthless!

“S-Sorr—”

“How could you drop such a huge bomb on me so casually?! Y-You almost gave me a heart attack!” she spluttered.

“Oh. Er, sorry...?”

“For goodness’ sake, at least *look* as if you have something incredible to offer when you talk! Whew!”

It looked like the information I had about the Water Elemental Gate was far more valuable than I’d thought. So it wasn’t that she’d been bored; she’d simply been too stunned to speak.

“I bet if you checked my heart rate now, it’d totally be through the roof...” Alyssa wheezed, clutching her chest. Dang, and I hadn’t even finished telling her everything. How would she react when I told her about the *Earth* Elemental Gate? I was glad to know that information about Elemental Gates was in demand, though. I could potentially make a lot of money from this, like around 50,000 G—maybe even 100,000—if I was lucky. Nah, that was probably reaching too far. Still, if I could earn at least 50,000 G, I’d be able to afford the household objects I’d seen in the Earth Elementals’ town. I was looking forward to seeing how much my info would sell for.

“I-Is that all?”

“Nope. There’s more.”

Alyssa’s eyes widened at my answer. After several seconds, she seemed to make up her mind, her gaze fixed firmly on me.

“...Okay, let’s hear it,” she replied after taking a couple of deep breaths.

“You don’t have to psych yourself up *that* much.”

“If I don’t, I’m gonna lose my mind! Hurry up and spill!”

“All right. Besides the Water Elemental Gate, I also discovered the Earth Elemental Gate.”

“...”

“There were gnomes inside, by the way.”

“...”

“*And* you can get loads of iron ores.”

“...”

“Hello? Alyssa?”

That seemed to snap her out of her stupor. “Whew, that was close. I almost blew up again.”

“Are you okay?”

“I-I will be... But gosh, Elemental Gates and Undines and gnomes

and fish items and iron ores and— D’aaah! I don’t know what’s what anymore!”

Contrary to her claims, Alyssa was far from calm. She was practically tearing her hair out.

“Psst! Alyssa! You’re wiggling out!”

“...Shoot, what’s wrong with me? That was close.”

“Too late, I’d say.”

“Ahem. Surely, you don’t have any more info for me, do you? *Do you?*”

I could practically hear her screaming, *Please don’t tell me you do*. Unfortunately for her, I wasn’t done yet.

“Let’s see... Well, some of this is mere conjecture, but I have a hunch as to where the other Elemental Gates are, as well as how to open them.”

I proceeded to tell Alyssa what I had learned from the Undine Chief—that the days of the week corresponded to the Elemental Gates’ attributes. I also shared my speculation that the entrances to the gates were located at the other key sites in Zone Two.

“As a matter of fact, the Earth Elemental Gate appeared when I offered an earth crystal to the Stone Circle. Based on everything I’ve learned, I think the Fire Elemental Gate is located in the burning torch and the Air Elemental Gate in the whistling boulder.”

“I-I see. That seems pretty likely.”

“Right? But I can’t figure out which day the Air Elemental Gate corresponds to. Like, there’s fire, water, and earth, but...”

No matter how many times I racked my brains, the last gate’s corresponding day remained a mystery. Although my guess was Moon Day, I didn’t have a concrete reason to back up my claim other than that out of the remaining days—Moon Day, Tree Day, Gold Day, and Sun Day—the moon seemed to be associated most closely with air, like that Japanese proverb about clouds obscuring the moon. Thankfully, you could always count on Alyssa, who was far more knowledgeable than me.

“Well, if you think about it in Wuxing terms, air, or wind, is usually associated with the element wood.”

“Whoa! Then the answer must be Tree Day!”

I hadn’t considered the possibility of Wuxing, aka the Five Phases, at all. However, Alyssa didn’t look fully convinced with her theory.

“Hmm...”

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“Tree Day is when the Sequoia Dryad descends, right? I was wondering if the devs would actually have two events overlap on the same day.”

“Right, good point.”

If not Wuxing, though, then what? As I pondered the question further, Alyssa suddenly seemed to remember something.

“Wait, I think I’ve got it!”

“What is it?”

“Do you remember the tale of how this world was born, Yuto?”

Alyssa was referring to the creation myth of the world LJO was set in. The story was listed on the official website, which I had read before starting the game. If I remembered correctly, the myth went something like this: In the beginning, the God of Darkness created the universe on Moon Day. On the following day, Fire Day, the God of War introduced fire to the world, and on Water Day, the Ocean God made it rain from the heavens. On Tree Day, the Tree Goddess gave life to lush greenery; on Gold Day, the God of the Sky exhaled the first breath of air, and on Earth Day, the God of the Earth created dry land. On the final day, Sun Day, the God of Light blessed the world. Following this logic, air would be attributed to Gold Day, not Tree Day.

“That sounds extremely plausible,” I agreed.

“You think so too, right?”

Gold Day was one week away. That seemed like enough time to get my hands on an air crystal. As I concluded that part of my report, I heard Alyssa mutter under her breath.

“So *that’s* why they were so desperate to get an earth crystal... Guess they’d managed to figure it out too. Too bad Yuto beat them to it, though... Heh heh, serves you right, suckers. That’s what you get for going back on your word and trying to haggle with me at the last minute.”

“Did you say something?”

“Oh, nothing. Don’t mind me.”

“If you say so. Okay, so the next bit of info I have is...”

Next, I told Alyssa about our newest addition to the family, Olea. I told her everything I knew about Olea’s stats, skills, and origins.

“Dang... Bet a lot of Farmers will be wanting Taming skills now...”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

That was just it: Olive Treants were monsters intended not for Tamers, but for Farmers. Since you needed Arboriculture to grow them, most Tamers were likely to fail at that. It seemed like these monsters had been designed with highly skilled Farmers who just happened to possess low-level Taming skills in mind.

“Gotta say, their Ingredient Production skill is pretty neat. Plus, you can even get their rare drops, Tree Spirit’s Sacred Branches... Gosh, what an emotional roller coaster that was. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this wiped just from hearing news in all my time as an information broker.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to wear you out.”

“Nya ha ha, just kidding. If anything, you’ve got me all fired up! All right, what else? I know there’s something you still haven’t told me.”

“Huh? Like what?”

She sounded pretty certain that I was keeping something from her. I didn’t think I had anything else worth selling, though... Seeing my puzzled expression, Alyssa seemed to think for a bit.

“Hmm... You don’t really browse the forums, do you, Yuto?”

“No, not really.”

“Guess you wouldn’t know what people say about you, then... Yuto, you don’t have any info you want to keep to yourself, do you? I know you’re not really the type to do so.”

You got it, Alyssa. She really knew me like the back of her hand.

“Nope. Like you said, I don’t have any secrets.”

“In that case, I’ll ask you a few questions, so do you mind answering them? I’ll then judge whether your info is worth putting a price tag on. How does that sound?”

Ah, I saw what she was getting at now. There had been a few times when the information I’d thought was worthless had actually been completely new discoveries; I guessed she was trying to avoid a repeat of that. Answering Alyssa’s questions seemed easy enough, so I was more than happy with the arrangement.

“Great! First, can you tell me more about your monsters? Starting with Olto’s stats.”

“Sure thing.”

I started with Olto, then moved on to Sakura, Rick, Bear Bear, Fau, and Reflet’s stats and skills. I also explained how we used each skill and what my monsters were capable of making.

“For some reason, Fau can use Alchemy to make herbal tea leaves despite not having Cooking skills. I was surprised when I saw that.”

“Ah, that’s something that was discovered recently.”

“It was?”

That was too bad. If I’d known that earlier, I might have been able to sell that info too.

“Up until now, crafter-types mostly made stuff in rental craft studios or at their homes, right? That, or they would have joint crafting sessions with players who had similar skill sets. However, with the recent field expansions, people have taken to concocting potions and stuff on the spot using the ingredients they just found. As a result, we discovered that members in the same party can share their crafting skills with one another, just like with gathering nodes.”

“Gotcha. No wonder.”

“That said, I’ve no idea if the same rule applies to monsters’ skills

or not.”

“That’s true.”

“Speaking of crafting, have you made any cool wooden crafts recently? Heard you were selling something interesting at your stand, although I haven’t been able to get my hands on the actual item yet.”

“You mean my moss balls?”

“Yup, that’s the one. Lots of people wanna know how to make them.”

Hmm, what to do...? Sakura made those moss balls, not me. She was the one who came up with the idea through trial and error. Selling her recipe to other people felt wrong, as though I were selling her short.

“Sorry, that’s actually Sakura’s handiwork. It wouldn’t be right for me to sell that info.” I bowed.

Alyssa gave me a wry smile and dismissed my apology with a wave. “No worries. You don’t have to sell anything you don’t want to. Your reason for keeping it a secret is very you, though. If you ever change your mind, I’m only a call away.”

“I’ll be sure to let you know then.”

“If Woodworking’s off limits...how about Cooking then? You made all kinds of food, didn’t you? I’ll pay you good money if you’re willing to share the recipes and where you got all the ingredients and condiments.”

“Sure. That I don’t mind.”

“Great! Let’s hear it!”

Alyssa continued grilling me, sinking into thought every now and then as I answered her questions. I was relieved I was able to contribute some new info.

“All righty, I think that’s all I wanted to ask.”

“So, what did you think? How much do you reckon my info is worth?”

“C-Could you give me a few minutes? I need time to calculate everything.”

It seemed like it would take a while, and understandably so. I had shared a lot of findings with her, after all. That reminded me—there were a few things I wanted to buy too. It would probably be easier for her to sell me that information first and deduct that price from the total amount. Alyssa looked thrilled to hear that.

“Mhm, mhm. Great, that would be a lifesaver! In fact, *please* do so...” Alyssa bowed to me for some reason. Oh well, that suited me just fine. There was plenty of stuff I wanted to ask her.

“Okay then. Do you know anything about Undines?” I asked, deciding to start with information about Reflet. I also wanted to know about Undines’ skills and evolution options. Unfortunately, Alyssa

shook her head apologetically.

“Sorry. I don’t have anything on Undines. If anything, I’m desperate to buy more info about them from *you*.”

“Aw, okay. Figured as much.”

Just as I had assumed based on Alyssa’s reaction when I told her about the monsters I encountered in the Water Elemental Gate, the existence of Undines had not yet been officially confirmed.

“In that case...what’s the exciting news you were talking about earlier? I’d love to hear what it is.”

“Oh, that...”

Immediately, Alyssa looked downcast—all the light seemed to have gone out of her eyes. What happened?

“Alyssa?”

“Heh... ‘Exciting news,’ my ass... I really thought I was on to something, huh?” She rolled her eyes at herself.

“What?”

“Whatever. All right, I’ll tell you. Feel free to laugh if you want.”

“Okay...?”

“Remember the first server-wide announcement? You know, the one about how the first player to unlock the Elemental Gate would receive the title ‘The Elemental Gate Unlocker.’”

“Yeah. Someone had probably just unlocked the Fire Elemental Gate,” I replied, remembering that the announcement had been on Fire Day.

“Right you are. Anyway, the so-called unlocker came to sell me some info. They didn’t tell me *everything* they knew, though—only that if you offered a fire crystal to a certain location, you could gain access to the Fire Elemental Gate.”

Based on where that party was usually active, Alyssa had assumed the gate was somewhere in Zone Four or Five.

“But as it turns out, it was in Zone Two all along. Doesn’t matter anymore, though, now that I’ve heard your account.”

Truthfully, there was nothing in their report that wasn’t already covered in mine. In fact, I had basically revealed everything they’d been trying to hide. *Sorry, strangers whose names I do not know*. It wasn’t hard to imagine tons of players flocking to the Fire Elemental Gate next week...

“Oh, the party members also mentioned they received a skill scroll as a bonus for unlocking the gate. Said it contained a skill called Fire Manipulation.”

“Yeah, I got one of those too. Mine were Water Exploration and Gem Finder.”

“Gotcha. Looks like even though the skills are assigned randomly, they still correspond to each gate’s attribute.”

My guess had been correct. In that case, unlocking the final gate would most likely grant you an air or wind skill.

“Anything else you wanna know?”

“Let’s see... Do you have any info on Fermentation skills?”

“Today’s your lucky day. I got just the thing for you, hot off the press. Heard it from a Brewer who was really into Isshi Soden role-playing. You know, that whole ‘sole succession’ thing. Took me ages to get it out of them.”

Isshi Soden role-playing? As in Fist of the North Star? That was pretty hard core. That was on the same level as Siegfried’s knight impersonation or Murakage’s ninja role-playing. *The more you know...*

“Cool. Could you tell me more about it?”

“Fermentation appears to be a higher-level skill derived from Brewing. Evidently, if you raise your Brewing level, you get the option of switching to either Brewing (Advanced) or Fermentation.”

“How useful is Fermentation?”

“Well, you get higher-quality results and shorter brewing times than with regular Brewing. You also get more options of stuff you can make, like yogurt.”

“Does that mean Fermentation is superior to Brewing (Advanced)?”

“Not necessarily. The latter supposedly gets you even better, speedier results. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. In your case, it might be easier to compare it to Farming and Arboriculture.”

“Right, that sorta makes sense.”

“There are also items called fermenting barrels, which are capable of doing all the things brewing barrels can do. Not only can you brew stuff in them, but when it comes to making fermented foods, you can expect the end products to have higher ratings. That said, you can still make fermented foods in a regular brewing barrel as long as you possess Fermentation.”

What Alyssa told me next stunned me: fermenting barrels were actually sold in the Town of Beginnings. I was further shocked to learn that information came from none other than Knut, the bean farmer in Alf. Evidently, you could learn all this by asking her. *Hang on, though*—hadn’t I heard all that already? Now that I thought about it, maybe she had said it was a fermenting barrel and not a brewing barrel. It seemed like I had totally misunderstood her. According to Alyssa, fermenting barrels could be purchased at a brewed foods shop in the Town of Beginnings. The downside was that the shop was invisible to all save for those who possessed Brewing skills, similar to the florist that only appeared if you had Plant Knowledge. I took note of its location, resolving to visit it later.

“Hmm. Yogurt, eh...?” I mused. I would love to make some if possible. Yogurt was a pretty versatile food and could be used as a condiment, spread, or baking ingredient.

“By the way, you can get goat’s milk, the ingredient for yogurt, in the Northern Town. Cow’s milk hasn’t been discovered yet.”

“Really? Awesome, I’ll head there later!”

“You can find all the details in the data I gave you.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

Strange. I hadn’t noticed any goats when I passed by earlier. Maybe I had to visit the agricultural district where there were more farms. *Wait a minute, though—I had* seen cows in the village of Alf. When I informed Alyssa of this, her eyes widened visibly. It seemed like none of the other servers had discovered any cows. Perhaps you needed a special skill in addition to a high favorability score for them to appear.

“I’d also like some maps if possible. One for the Eastern Town and one for the Northern Town.”

“Sure thing. Here you go. All of the info our clan is aware of so far is listed here. It also includes event locations and all that jazz.”

“For real? Are you sure I can have this? Sounds incredibly valuable.”

“I know I made it sound like a big deal, but it’s really not as amazing as you might think. It’s nowhere near complete, and I’m pretty sure there are plenty more events that haven’t been discovered yet. We’ve got all the deets on shops and guilds that are publicly available, though, so it ought to be helpful in that regard at least.”

“Roger that.”

As soon as I accepted Alyssa’s data, the blank map on my status window suddenly became infinitely more detailed. The Quick-Eared Cats had even given individual star ratings to restaurants. This map was bound to make my exploration of the towns much easier.

“Okay, I think that’s all for now.”

“Sure you don’t want anything else?”

“Hm? No, not really.”

“I see...”

“Is there a problem with that?”

“Well, to tell the truth...” Alyssa looked grave. “I only have 200,000 G on me at the moment.”

“Come again?”

Did she just say 200,000 G? Surely, she must have meant *twenty* thousand, right?

“I’ll be frank. The info you just sold me is worth *a lot*—so much that it still won’t be enough even if I give you all the money I have now. I was hoping we could call it even by selling you some inside

skinny in return, but...guess not. Gotta go to the guild ASAP and withdraw some money... No wait, verification ought to come first... Oh, but I shouldn't keep you waiting too long. Hmm, in that case..."

Alyssa seemed lost in thought, brow furrowed deeply while she muttered under her breath. Come to think of it, it was only natural that she would want to verify what I'd just said.

"Does that mean I'll get my payment after you're done verifying everything?"

"Y-Yes. That would probably be best..."

That was the same as when I'd discovered the underground altar. However, I wasn't sure if I could afford the household objects I was after with my advance payment alone. Rather than hang back and wait, what if I offered to help her instead? That way, I had a better chance of getting my payment sooner.

"If you want, Alyssa, I could help you with the verification stuff."

"Huh? You really mean that? That'd be great!"

"Just wanna get paid sooner, that's all."

"I trust you, so I'm positive your information is accurate, but I can't skip this process, you know? Standard procedure. Also, I might as well ask while we're at it—you *do* have an earth crystal, right?"

"Yeah, I do. What about it?"

"Would you be willing to sell it or exchange it with a different attribute crystal? Since this is urgent, we'll need one ASAP. I can offer an air and fire crystal in exchange. How about it?"

"Wait, you're offering me *two* crystals for one?"

"That's right."

Alyssa's proposal seemed way more to my benefit than hers. I no longer needed my earth crystal; if I could just get my hands on an air crystal and fire crystal for the remaining two gates, I'd be all set to go.

"Are you sure, though?"

"Absolutely. Besides, I'm the one who suggested it. Consider this a onetime offer, just for today."

"Okay, if you say so. I gladly accept."

"Thanks! Now we can get right on with it!"

"Honestly, it's no trouble at all."

"I'll go round up our team members right away! Be right back!"

From then on, Alyssa and the Quick-Eared Cats were as speedy to act as their name implied. Just twenty minutes after she'd called a meeting, Alyssa had assembled an entire coterie in front of her stall. That alone was impressive, but there was a bigger surprise in store. As it turned out, Alyssa was none other than the submaster of the Quick-Eared Cats. When I heard the other members referring to her as such, I initially didn't realize whom they were talking about. Come to think of it, she had always paid me handsomely for my information; no

doubt her authority as submaster came into play here.

With the other clan members acting as our bodyguards, we arrived at the Earth Elemental Gate just like that. The monsters in this area didn't stand a chance against players who usually fought in areas with far more formidable enemies. Despite their imposing exteriors, the Quick-Eared Cats were all kind and respectful, even bowing and thanking *me*, a total nobody—perhaps a cordiality extended to all their regulars.

The whole journey took us less than an hour from the time I checked in at Alyssa's stall. As soon as we arrived at the Gate, the Quick-Eared Cats set to work. First, we tried forming a party with me as the leader to see if we could pass through the gate that way. The moment I walked through the gate, however, our party automatically disbanded, leaving the other members stranded outside.

"Guess piggybacking on Yuto isn't an option, huh..." Alyssa murmured.

"Uh-uh. Too bad."

"All right. Let's try entering without Yuto next."

"Got it."

"Now, is one crystal enough to get all of us in, or do we need one crystal per person...? Only one way to find out."

Our brigade consisted of eleven players and one monster, me being the only one who wasn't a member of the Quick-Eared Cats. Lewin and Maple were part of the crew too. Although I was concerned about their leaving their shops unattended, this mission was evidently far more important to them. Regrettably, my monsters had to sit this one out, as our top priority was to let the Cats do their job. The sole monster accompanying us was a squirrel that belonged to a woman with Taming skills.

"We only managed to get two earth crystals. Gotta be extra careful with these," Alyssa declared, taking the crystals out of her inventory. One of them was the one I gave her; the other belonged to Lewin.

"Okay. Let's form a team and try offering one of the crystals."

"Oh, I hear something."

"Who knew you could trigger an event by matching the crystal's attribute with that of the day of the week?"

"Never would've made the connection myself."

Each of the members wondered aloud in fascination as they placed the crystal in the center of the Stone Circle. Immediately, a beam of light rose from it, much like the first time I unlocked the gate.

"Huh? No way." Alyssa looked taken aback.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"They say three of us can go through the gate."

The clan members seemed to have gotten an announcement

restricting the number of players allowed entry. *How weird—not one, not all, but three people?* That seemed like a very specific number. Following the gate's instructions, Alyssa chose two members to accompany her and entered the gate. One of them was the female Tamer with the squirrel. Apparently, monsters didn't count as individuals, as the woman and her companion were able to pass through the gate together. Alyssa's crew returned shortly, repeating the process several more times.

"Just as I thought. Seems like there aren't any more restrictions beyond the initial entry. Why the number three, though?" Alyssa scratched her head wonderingly.

"Might become clear once we offer the remainin' crystal," Lewin suggested. "C'mon, let's move on to round two."

"Good point."

Lewin led the next group, once again setting a crystal down in the center of the Stone Circle. This crystal was one that he'd obtained personally as an event reward. This time, the entry limit was six players. I hadn't heard any such announcements when I unlocked the gate, but that was most likely because I had been on my own at the time. What was the reason for this difference, though? To me, it all seemed utterly random, but the Cats were quick to realize what was going on.

"It has to do with the quality..." Alyssa asserted, realization dawning upon her face. Now that she mentioned it, my earth crystal, which had been a rare drop from a gnome, had been of a three-star rarity, whereas Lewin's crystal had been of a six-star rarity.

"Dang. Never even thought about the quality. There've only been six-star crystals on the market so far," Lewin mused.

"That's just it. Now that we know, though, prices are bound to start fluctuating greatly depending on the crystal's quality."

Once more true to their name, the Quick-Eared Cats were speedy on the analysis.

"How many players do you think still have their attribute crystals from the village event or Martial Arts Tournament?"

"Not many, I'd say. Most players who exchanged their points for them would've used them to make weapons by now."

"True. You do need elemental weapons to clear certain zones."

"Prices are gonna skyrocket, I tell ya..."

I was clearly the anomaly here. Unlike me, most people would have used their attribute crystals immediately, rather than saved them. After all, why would they have chosen to obtain them if not to use them?

"Basically, if we don't enter the gate now, there's no guarantee we can return again today, right?"

“Pretty much. Doubt we can find another earth crystal in time.”

“In that case, I’ll be going through the gate, thank you very much.”

“Nuh-uh, *I* will.”

Despite belonging to the same group, none of the clan members seemed willing to give up their spot. After an intense glaring match, they finally decided to settle the issue fair and square with a game of rock-paper-scissors. Since Lewin had sacrificed his crystal, it only seemed fair that he be guaranteed entry. However, the remaining five slots were still up for grabs.

“I don’t care if I’m miserable for the rest of the year! I need all the luck I can get *right now*!”

“Smile upon me, Lady Luck! I command you!”

“Fools! This game isn’t about luck—it’s a game of wits!”

Some people played “scissors,” their movements so enthusiastic you would’ve thought they were unleashing a superpower, only to be crushed by players who chose “rock.” Those who played “paper” against “scissors” buried their faces while the winners punched the air triumphantly. Everywhere, you could hear cries of victory and despair.

“AAAAH!”

“Why, oh why?!”

“But Sagittarius was supposed to be the luckiest zodiac sign today!”

Mhm. They sure looked like they were having fun. Once the second set of travelers had been decided, I made a quick trip back to my farm. Alyssa had suggested I fetch my monsters to explore the dungeon, mainly because she wanted to make good use of the remaining party slots, and also so that she and the other members could see my monsters’ abilities in action.

While Alyssa’s and Lewin’s teams were busy exploring the Earth Elementals’ town, I hurried to my farm, accompanied by the members who lost the great rock-paper-scissors battle. Initially, I was worried whether they’d be able to fight in their forlorn state, but as it happened, I had severely underestimated them. Despite being out of sorts, they were still capable of slaying the monsters in this area without so much as breaking a sweat. I should have known: these were the *Quick-Eared Cats* we were talking about. Still, I hadn’t expected so much fight out of such a doleful bunch...

For my team, I chose Olto, Sakura, Rick, and Fau, keeping an emphasis on members who were skilled in gathering and support rather than fighting.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I apologized upon returning.

“Mm-mm.”

“Hey there. Welcome back.” The Quick-Eared Cats waved me over. Although they weren’t done with their mapping of the town yet, they had evidently decided to check out the dungeon first—it wasn’t as if the town was going anywhere. Incidentally, Alyssa and the others hadn’t obtained a skill scroll. As expected, only the first player to unlock the gate could receive one.

“Whoa, it’s Silver-Haired’s gnome!”

“Where’s the Undine cutie-pie...?”

“I want a pixie too!”

“Aren’t pixies a cross between a gnome and a tree nymph, though? Might have a shot at it if you can get a gnome here.”

“Ooh, good thinking!”

The Cats were visibly excited by my monsters. I didn’t blame them—my companions were certified adorable. As they were implying, though, once word of the Earth Elemental Gate got out, there might be an increase in pixies in the near future. My suspicion was that pixies were born from two elemental creatures breeding together. Getting a gnome and a monster from the Fire Elemental Gate seemed like the fastest way to achieve this. That said, someone else could have tamed a tree nymph by now, considering there was still a one-in-a-million chance of encountering one in the wild. If so, all they needed was to tame a gnome; if they were lucky, their monsters might lay an egg sooner than expected. I hoped that was the case.

“Wait, you don’t mind other people getting a pixie too?” the female Tamer asked me in amazement.

“Hm? Of course not. I wouldn’t have sold Fau’s info otherwise.”

“R-Right, of course... You never cease to impress me, Silver-Haired.” She nodded in admiration. I didn’t get what was so impressive, though. If there were more pixies around, I could compare their stats with Fau’s, not to mention learn about other evolution forms. *The more cute tamed monsters, the better, am I right?*

“All right, enough chitchat. Time to head into the dungeon,” Alyssa announced.

“Aye, aye, captain.”

“Finally!”

“Yeah, baby! Gonna dig up *all* the ores!”

Before that, however, we had several experiments to conduct. First, we tried entering the dungeon in different ways, either individually or in groups. From these attempts, we learned that each party got its own individual dungeon instance. As a team, we were allowed up to twelve people per group; if we opted to go solo, each member would be sent to a different dungeon, albeit with the same layout. While I didn’t really mind either way, the Cats seemed to give this point careful consideration. They eventually concluded that we

wouldn't have to worry about a raid boss, given that only a max of twelve people could attempt the dungeon at the same time.

Moreover, the number of items contained in the hidden loot boxes seemed to vary depending on how many players there were. Upon opening the chest as a group, we discovered that there were enough night vision necklaces for each member. However, after dissolving the party and returning to the same spot separately, the treasure chest could no longer be found. *Too bad*—I was hoping I could get another item. Unfortunately, when I formed a party with three other players who hadn't gotten their items yet, we only found three necklaces inside the box instead of four. Lastly, we fought a few battles in the Earth Elementals' trial. Once the Cats had obtained enough evidence to back up my claims, the verification process was complete.

Though we encountered a unique gnome specimen along the way, sadly none of us were able to tame it. We did manage to get a four-star earth crystal, however, which was a win if you asked me. This way, the remaining members would be able to pass through the gate too. The others thanked me profusely, saying that the reason we encountered a unique specimen was due to my Unique Monster Enthusiast title and Olto's Luck skill. I was half-afraid that they would prostrate themselves before me. In exchange for my crystal, the Cats gave me most of the items they'd found in the cave and agreed to make up the difference in cash afterwards.

Carlo, the other Tamer in the group, had tamed a Dark Bat instead of a gnome; Stone Snakes couldn't be tamed due to being Summoner-specific monsters. He seemed ecstatic about his new monster, as creatures capable of flight and dark vision were extremely valuable in his view.

Maple was the one who was after a gnome. Despite being an ex-Merchant turned Farmer, she had acquired the skill Tame solely for this purpose. Unfortunately, since she hadn't had a chance to use it yet, she failed to tame a single unique specimen, let alone a regular one. It was evident that ordinary players who lacked Monster Taming skills had a harder time taming monsters than full-fledged Tamers. I had a feeling she might hole up in here for a while and keep at it.

Roughly three hours had passed since we entered the Earth Elementals' trial when the following incident took place. I'd left most of the fighting to Alyssa and her crew, taking things easy while providing the occasional helping hand. It was after one of our battles that a change came over Sakura. Alyssa was the first to notice it.

"Um, Yuto?"

"Yes? What's up?"

"B-Behind you!"

"Behind me? What do y— Holy shit! Sakura?! Wh-What's going on

with you?!”

“...?”

I whirled around to see Sakura emanating a bedazzling, bluish-white light from her entire body. Judging from the curious expression on her face, however, she didn't seem to be aware of what was happening to her.

“Wh-What in the world...?” I stuttered, dumbstruck by the sight.

“Your tamed monster, Sakura, has reached level 20. Your monster is ready to evolve. Please choose a new evolution from your status menu.”

Prompted by the announcement, I quickly checked my status screen. Sure enough, Sakura had leveled up from our most recent fight. In fact, she had already zoomed right by to level 25. I gazed at the question on my screen asking if I wanted to evolve my monster.

“But wait, that can't be the trigger.”

I didn't recall Rick glowing when he reached his evolution threshold. Regardless, Alyssa seemed to think it was perfectly plausible, citing a couple of reports of the same phenomenon occurring during a monster's evolution.

“I heard one of Amimin's monsters from the beta phase glowed when it was ready to evolve,” she informed me.

“Do you know what caused it?” I asked. Amimin was one of the most famous Tamers in LJO. In addition to being an ex-beta tester, she was also at the forefront of the game. As such, I regarded her as a highly credible source.

“We're not a hundred percent sure yet, but...it probably has to do with a special evolution.”

In Amimin's case, she seemed to have unlocked an alternative evolved form by obtaining a special item during beta. Similarly, the other player who'd reported the unusual incident had unlocked an alternative evolution route by clearing a special event.

“Does that mean Sakura...?”

“It's possible. Why don't you check her options first?”

“G-Got it, will do!”

Sakura had four evolution types available altogether, one more than Rick. Due to the dearth of information about tree nymphs, all of them were completely new to me. They all sounded really intriguing, though. The first option, Dryad, looked like her normal evolution. Other than an overall boost in stats, there didn't seem to be a huge difference between it and her current form.

Next was High Treant, which was a slightly off-the-wall option. If I selected this form, Sakura would gain the skills Tree Spirit Cloning, Noncombatant, and Farm Management—essentially transforming her into a farm-bound monster like Olea. Perhaps that was the case for all Treant-type monsters. Based on the above, High Treant was a firm no

for me. One farm-management monster was more than enough, and besides, without Sakura, our party would suffer greatly in battles. I assumed this option was available to me since I had maxed out Sakura's favorability score.

If I remembered correctly, evolution types were displayed in the following order: normal evolutions, max favorability score evolutions, and unique evolutions. That had to mean the third option, Sapling Fae, was a unique evolution. I already knew from research and prior experience that unique specimens had special evolved forms that weren't available for ordinary specimens. The difference between Dryads (normal) and Sapling Faes (unique) was as follows:

Name: Sakura / Race: Dryad / Base Level: Lv. 25
Master: Yuto
HP: 74/74 / MP: 76/76
Strength: 14 / Endurance: 22 / Agility: 12
Dexterity: 16 / Intelligence: 17 / Sanity: 20
Skills: Arboriculture, Tree Magic (Advanced),
Photosynthesis, Gather (Advanced), Regeneration
(Advanced), Endure, Whip Skills, Water Resistance,
Charm, Woodworking, Forest Ranger, Shield Skills,
Ingredient Production, Beekeeping
Equipment: Dryad's Whip, Dryad's Garments, Tree
Nymph's Buckler

Name: Sakura / Race: Sapling Fae / Base Level: Lv.
25
Master: Yuto
HP: 74/74 / MP: 76/76
Strength: 15 / Endurance: 23 / Agility: 12
Dexterity: 15 / Intelligence: 17 / Sanity: 19
Skills: Arboriculture, Tree Magic (Advanced),
Photosynthesis, Gather, Regeneration, Endure, Whip
Skills (Advanced), Water Resistance, Charm,
Woodworking (Advanced), Forest Ranger, Shield
Skills, Status Ailment Resistance, Ingredient
Production
Equipment: Dryad's Whip, Dryad's Garments, Tree
Nymph's Buckler

Dryads gained the skills Beekeeping and Ingredient Production, while their Tree Magic, Gather, and Regeneration skills progressed to advanced status. Sapling Faes gained Status Ailment Resistance and Ingredient Production, while their Tree Magic, Whip Skills, and

Woodworking skills progressed to advanced status. If it hadn't been for the fourth option, I would no doubt have chosen Sapling Fae. However, Sakura possessed one more evolution type that was neither a normal nor unique evolution.

"Mother Tree Fae?"

In terms of stats, Mother Tree Fae and Sapling Fae were almost identical. The only difference was that the former had an additional skill called "Divine Blessing." According to its description, Divine Blessing was a skill that "allowed the user to connect with divine spirits and borrow their strength." This had to be a special evolution, similar to what Amimin had experienced.

"How did this option pop up, though...?" I mused.

"Anything come to mind?" Alyssa asked.

"Not really... How about you, Sakura? Any ideas?"

"...?"

No, of course not. How would she know when she didn't even realize what was happening to her right now? The answer seemed to lie in the species' name and its distinct skill. The first thing that came to mind when seeing the word "mother" was Fau. Did this allude to the fact that Sakura had become a parent through monster breeding? If that was the case, though, it seemed strange that there weren't more monsters that had unlocked a special evolution.

The other possibility I could think of was the Sequoia Dryad. The Dryad was essentially like a mother to Sakura, and she had also bestowed a mysterious blessing upon her just the other day. It seemed reasonable to assume that blessing had acted as some kind of trigger and granted Sakura a skill that allowed her to draw on supernatural powers. I could probably think of a few more possibilities, but for now, I decided to evolve Sakura, as that seemed like the best way to get some answers.

"All right, let's go with Mother Tree Fae!"

"...!"

The special effects were pretty much the same as Rick's evolution. Once the usual bright light had subsided, Sakura stood before me in her new form, patiently awaiting my response.

"You kinda look taller," I commented.

"...♪"

She seemed to have grown a bit, now just shy of 150 centimeters. Before, she had looked around twelve or thirteen years old; after evolving, she looked closer to fifteen. Her expression also seemed more mature. Other than that, her outfit had become slightly snazzier. In addition to the numerous plants decorating her clothes, several baby-pink petals had been stitched on, adding pops of color to her outfit. She also wore a ring in the shape of woven vines on her right

pinkie.



“...”

“Mhm, cute as always. I dig it.”

Sakura beamed as I patted her head. Damn, we were almost the same height now. She was still shorter than me, but not by much, the pair of us now more or less at the same eye level.

“Gosh, she really is a cutie,” Alyssa cooed. “Mark my words, Yuto—everyone’s gonna want a tree nymph now. You wouldn’t happen to know of any places swarming with them, would you?”

“Come on, Alyssa, you know I don’t.”

“Well, be sure to let me know if you find one!”

“You really think a place like that exists?” I quirked a brow. Even if it did, tree nymphs like Sakura were not only incredibly rare, but powerful too. I’d be toast the minute I stepped foot in such a place.

“Oh well, you’ll be the first to know if I find it. *If.*”

“That’s a promise, okay?!”

Let’s be real, Alyssa. I’m clearly not the right person for the job, so don’t get your hopes up.

“Right, shall we test out Sakura’s new abilities?”

“Oh yeah, good idea.”

Though Alyssa seemed way more hyped than I was, it didn’t hurt to have some extra help. Thanks to the Quick-Eared Cats’ assistance, we learned that Sakura’s stats had improved significantly on the whole. Her advanced skills were particularly potent, and it was clear that her AoE attacks and status ailments were stronger than before. Unfortunately, her new skill remained a mystery; we weren’t so much as able to activate it. It appeared that Divine Blessing only worked under certain conditions.

“If you’re ever able to use it, let me know, okay? Or just use it whenever the time seems right,” I told Sakura.

“...!”

At long last, our half a day’s expedition was concluded.

“Thanks so much.” I bowed to the clan members as we left the Earth Elemental Gate.

“Likewise. Thank you for everything,” Alyssa replied.

“Don’t mention it. Fighting was much easier with you guys, not to mention Sakura got to evolve.”

“We’re equally thankful we got to witness a monster’s special evolution. That was a really valuable opportunity. We’ll also throw in a little extra for Sakura’s info.”

Whoa, really? Sweet! However, Alyssa’s expression soon turned apologetic.

“Like I mentioned earlier, I’m short on cash at the moment. Do you mind waiting a bit? I’ll withdraw some money once we’re back in

town.”

Withdraw money? Did that mean there were banks or ATMs in this game? Alyssa’s jaw dropped at my question. It was apparently common knowledge that you could store items or deposit money at Adventurers’ Guilds. Now that I thought about it, apart from the few trips I’d made when I was just starting out, I hadn’t really made a point of visiting the guild. I *had* made a very brief stop at one during the event, but that was it. No wonder I hadn’t noticed.

“What’s your Adventurers’ Guild rank, Yuto?” Alyssa asked me.

“Two,” I replied.

“*Two?* That’s awfully low. At your rank, you can deposit up to 200,000 G and twenty types of items, with a max of ninety-nine items per category.”

“Gotcha.”

Now that she mentioned it, it made perfect sense to have a system for safekeeping in place. That would minimize the risk of players losing rare items in case they respawned. Frankly, I was an idiot for not realizing this sooner.

“That said, I wouldn’t have gotten info about the Water Elemental Gate from you if you’d known about this system.”

“Tr-True.”

If I’d known, I would definitely have made a beeline for the guild to store my precious attribute crystals—meaning I would never have found the Elemental Gates. Actually, maybe that was why no one else had found them before me.

“What about the players who discovered the Fire Elemental Gate, though?”

“Oh, they simply forgot to deposit theirs, apparently.”

As careless as they were, I couldn’t help feeling a slight sense of kinship with them. While we chatted in the Earth Elementals’ town square, I heard footsteps approaching us from the entrance. At first, I thought the Gnome Chief had returned, but after listening carefully, it sounded as though there were multiple pairs of feet. Shortly, a group of three Soldiers and one Mage came into view.

“Damn it! Someone else beat us to it!”

“No way!”

“Knew it. I had a bad feeling when we didn’t get a skill scroll...”

“What’d I tell you?! That scroll *was* reserved for the first person to pass through the gate!”

The men looked like they wanted to tear their hair out. Meanwhile, Alyssa observed them with a gleeful look on her face.

“Well, well. Look who’s here,” she said.

“Do you know them?” I asked.

“Yep. They’re the very party that opened the Fire Elemental Gate.”

“Oh, really?”

So *they* were the careless dummies who had forgotten to store their fire crystal at the guild. Moreover, I had sold the information that they’d been so desperate to keep to themselves. Considering I’d inadvertently thwarted their plans, it seemed best not to get involved.

“They wanted an earth crystal, so I did my best to find one for them. And then, they complained it was too expensive and tried to haggle with me. Can you believe it? The *nerve*. I wouldn’t have gone out of my way to negotiate with another player for their crystal if they hadn’t said they were willing to pay whatever it takes. Anyway, it looks like they lost their first-time bonus to you. Serves them right.” Alyssa chuckled. *Man, was she pissed as hell*. She seemed to be deriving a lot of joy from seeing them suffer.

“S-So you weren’t lying when you said you heard an announcement earlier...”

“Course not! It’s right here in the logs!”

“In the first place, it’s *your* fault for logging in late!”

“Shaddup! My train was late due to strong winds or some bullshit! It ain’t like I had a choice!”

The party seemed to have been after the skill scroll from the Earth Elemental Gate as well. Since they’d already unlocked the Fire Elemental Gate, they would surely have realized from the announcement that the scroll bonus was reserved for the initial gate unlockers. Unfortunately for them, the player who owned the earth crystal—who was presumably the leader of the group—had arrived late due to his train being delayed in real life. The poor dude clearly had no luck, but his bad luck had turned into my good fortune.

“How do the damn Cats know about this place anyway?!”

“The person who unlocked the Water Elemental Gate must’ve told them. Who else?”

“Where’s the dumbass that snitched on us?! Now that the brokers have gotten wind of this, everyone’s gonna know about the gates! I swear, I’m gonna throttle them when I find them!”

“So much for monopolizing the items here and making a killing!”

Sorry, guys. That dumbass would be me. I knew I’d done nothing wrong, but I still felt a bit bad for messing up their plans so much. I wasn’t going to apologize, though, at least not face-to-face. *Like I said—completely innocent*.

“Hey! You’re the submaster of the Quick-Eared Cats, aren’t ya?! How did you learn about this place?!” one of the guys yelled at Alyssa.

“That’s confidential. Not telling,” Alyssa replied breezily.

“C’mon, tell us! If it’s money you want, we’ll pay for it.”

“You know I can’t give out personal info. I’ll get insta-banned if I do that. Even if I did, what would you do with it? Track down that

player and chew them out? You do realize you'd get reported for harassment, right?"

"Gulp..."

"Also, you, buy info from me? Fat load of bull when you tried to haggle with me on the earth crystal. Are you gonna try and beat me down again? Hm?"

"Guh...!"

Yikes, the men were glaring daggers at her. Regardless, Alyssa managed to stand her ground and stare them down—a truly impressive feat. She absolutely had the upper hand here.

"I-Idiot! You shouldn't have tried to haggle with her!"

"Yeah, what were you thinking? That submaster is scary as hell!"

"What other choice did we have? It was like, *double* our budget!"

"Y-You're the ones who said the going rate was about 50,000 G...!"

"Why'd you have to be so aggressive here anyway?!"

"What?! You got a problem with my role?!"

Oh man, they were arguing big-time. Were they gonna be okay after this? I was starting to fear they would break into a fight. Thankfully, Alyssa had the carrot-and-stick approach down pat; she was as tactful as ever and knew exactly what to say.

"Relax, no need to get so upset. You have the Fire Elemental Gate all to yourselves until next Fire Day, so you can make all the money you want off that. Other than fire crystals, if you have any items or food you wanna sell, I'll buy them from you for a good price. Plus any info you have about monsters."

"Hmm..."

"Also, since I feel kinda bad for you guys, I'll give you a discount on the skinny on the other Elemental Gates too."

"Huh? You will?"

"Yep. In exchange, you better spill whatever you know about the Fire Elemental Gate. Deal?"

"D-Deal!"

Alyssa's negotiation skills were really something else. Or were these guys just that simple of marks? Now that the resentful mood had dissipated, the party was making a promise to exchange information with Alyssa. Thank goodness she had kept things under control; now we could return to town in good conscience.

"If you've never deposited money before, why don't you come with me to the Adventurers' Guild?" Alyssa suggested once we had returned to the Northern Town.

"Sure, I'd like that."

I decided to tag along with her.

"Wow, haven't been here in a while."

“N-Never thought I’d hear someone say that this late in the game... You really are something, Yuto. I should follow your example.”

Alyssa sounded downright impressed. It wasn’t as if I’d been avoiding the guild on purpose, though; I simply hadn’t had a reason to visit. While waiting for Alyssa and the other Quick-Eared Cats to withdraw their money, I took a look around the hall. I was pleasantly surprised to see there were quite a few quests I could fulfill right away, such as delivering boss drops and items with a three-star rarity or higher.

“Might as well complete all the quests I can while I’m here.”

Completing those quests saw my guild rank increase by one, and I was able to earn roughly 10,000 G. *I really should come here more often*, I thought to myself. Since I’d come all this way, I also asked the receptionist about the safekeeping system. Now that my guild rank was rank 3, I could deposit up to 300,000 G and thirty types of items, with a max of ninety-nine items per category. If only I’d known about this super useful system before the boss battle, I would’ve stored all my valuables here without a moment’s hesitation. In hindsight, I’d taken a huge risk by not doing so; I could have lost my precious crystals if I’d died. Thinking about it now sent a chill down my spine.

“Hmm... Should I at least store my water crystals, jades, and tamed monsters’ hearts here?”

The rest of my items were mostly crafting ingredients or ores that I could mine more of anytime. In the end, I decided to store only my most prized possessions at the guild. I’d figure out what to do with my money after I’d bought all the stuff I needed. While I was contemplating different ways of using the guild, Alyssa returned from her errand.

“All done.”

“Welcome back. Get everything you need?”

“Mhm. Here’s your payment.”

“Thank you.” I accepted her transfer gratefully. “Huh? Wait, what?”

I had to double-check the amount she’d just sent me to make sure I hadn’t read it wrong. This couldn’t be right: how could I have gained *500,000 G* all of a sudden?

“A-Alyssa, wait! This is one digit off!”

“Oh crap, really? Did I only send you 50,000 G?”

“No! You sent me *500,000 G*!”

Sure, I was expecting to receive about 100K, but 500,000 G was just way too much. She had to have sent me the wrong amount.

“What do you mean? That’s correct,” she replied, looking confused.

“C’mon, stop pulling my leg! *Five hundred thousand?!*”

“Yeah. The info you just sold us has premium value, so it’s only fair. In fact, the amount I just paid you barely even covers it.”

According to Alyssa, the breakdown was something like this:

Payment for how to unlock the Elemental Gates plus their locations x4.

Payment for the mostly accurate information on Undines and gnomes—monsters that not only Tamers, but anyone with Taming skills, would die to get their hands on.

Payment for information regarding monster drops and obtainable dungeon items.

More importantly, it was only Earth Day today, meaning people could potentially obtain gnomes in less than a week. Other than that, my miscellaneous info about recipes, crafting, and monsters seemed to have proved useful as well. What I’d thought was mere idle chitchat had apparently been a treasure trove of sellable information from Alyssa’s point of view.

“Your info on the Elemental Gates alone will probably sell for twenty—no, thirty thousand G. Pretty sure people wouldn’t mind paying that much. Reckon we’ll break even in a few days, maybe even by the end of today.”

“No way. For real?”

“Yes way. The bad news is that I can only pay up to 500,000 G this week. Otherwise, I’ll be breaching the limit.”

“What limit?”

“Don’t you know? There’s a limit on the number of items or amount of money you can transfer to other players in this game.”

Apparently, LJO regulated the amount of money and goods players could transfer to others within a given period. It made perfect sense if you thought about it; if people could just exchange their items freely, real-money trading between players would undoubtedly be rampant. Naturally, there had to be a limit. For regular players, our upper limit was determined by our player level, whereas things were slightly different for players belonging to specialized job classes. As a Merchant, Alyssa’s limit appeared to be set at 500,000 G per week.

“Guess I’ll have to close my shop for the rest of the week.”

“Sorry about that. I feel kinda bad.”

“Nah, don’t be. We’re really grateful for all the info you sold us, plus, you even helped us out with the verification process.”

Alyssa informed me that my findings on the Elemental Gates alone were worth at least 800,000 G. Including everything else, my total came to roughly 1,000,000 G. Unfortunately, she had already reached her money transfer limit for the week. Perhaps more concerning was the current state of the Quick-Eared Cats’ savings. I was utterly

speechless to be honest. Five hundred thousand was already a ridiculous amount of money to me, and now she was saying she needed to pay me 500,000 G *more*? I was more than just shocked—I felt as though my soul had left my body.

“That’s why I had Maple and Lewin accompany me, actually,” Alyssa confessed.

“Don’t worry. Lewin and I will pay the remaining 500,000 G,” Maple chuckled.

“Righto.” Lewin nodded. So that was why these two had tagged along. Were they going to be okay, though? Didn’t they just say the clan’s treasury was in a less-than-ideal state? Although they told me not to worry about it, their expressions implied otherwise. It was obvious just how tight their current financial situation was.

“Er, I don’t mind waiting a bit, actually. You said my info will sell at a premium, right? In that case, I can, like, wait until tomorrow night.”

“Really? You would?” Maple replied hopefully.

“Psst! Maple!” Alyssa chastised her.

“Think about it, though. If we pay Yuto the full one million right now, we reeeally won’t have anything left.”

“We’ll manage somehow if we all pitch in our pocket money. Worst-case scenario, I’ll sell one of my prized possessions.”

“Surely there’s no need to go that far. Come on, let’s have him wait. Besides, I just bought a farm, so I don’t have any money to contribute.”

“But...”

“Let’s take him up on his offer, okay? Hmm?”

“...Normally, an information broker *never* keeps their clients waiting for their payment, but...” Alyssa let out a resigned sigh.

Reluctantly, she made the following suggestion: First, she asked me to accept 250,000 G from Maple right now. She then promised to pay the remaining amount—250,000 G minimum—the day after tomorrow. By that, she meant that she was offering to pay me ten percent of the sales from the various bits of information I sold today. If all went according to plan, my total was expected to exceed 250,000 G. Although I had a hard time believing that, Alyssa seemed pretty confident. In the event that my info didn’t sell as well as they hoped, she guaranteed that she would still pay me 250,000 G. That seemed like a fair deal to me—more than fair, especially since there was a possibility I would get more than the price we initially agreed upon. I could see no disadvantages for me.

Would my information really sell as well as Alyssa foresaw, though? The Quick-Eared Cats weren’t exactly in the brokering business for profit. Once they’d sold something to enough players to

be in the black, they had no problems posting said info on their forum. This time, they planned to sell my findings for ten percent more than usual so I could get the extra revenue. Frankly, I was concerned that some players would be turned off by the price, but ultimately, they were the professionals, not me. I decided not to worry about it too much, and accepted Alyssa's deal.

"Okay. That's fine by me," I told her.

"Really? Phew, thanks! You're a lifesaver."

"Don't mention it. Thanks for buying my information for such a high price."

"Oh, and come by again if you find any more attribute crystals! I'll give you a good deal for them—or rather, Lewin will!"

"Sure, if I have any leftovers."

"Looking forward to it. Thanks for the informative report! See you around!"

"See ya. Talk to you again soon."

"Heh heh heh. Now, how shall I sell all this? Aside from selling info on the gates separately, I can offer set discounts, and..."

Seeing how hyped Alyssa was, I could probably expect a pretty substantial reward from her. *Go ham, girl. Show me your Merchant skills.* But man, I never expected to have this much money. I was practically a millionaire all of a sudden.

"Dang. What should I buy with all this?"

With the amount of money I had now, I could probably afford most anything.

"All right, let's buy some household objects first!"

First stop, the Undines' village. After that, I would visit the Earth Elementals' town again and explore the dungeon to get more earth crystals.

"Now that's decided, it's back to the farm. We'll head out again as soon as we've taken care of all our chores!"

Before that, however, I had to log out of the game. Tomorrow—or rather today, as it was already the next day—was going to be a busy day for us!

Ding-dong.

As soon as I logged in the next day, I was greeted with a familiar announcement.

"Please note that the following update will take place as scheduled."

The announcement was about an update that we'd been notified of previously. It seemed to be a fairly large one too, as we would be unable to log in to LJO from 2 a.m. until 10 a.m. the day after tomorrow, in-game time. In addition to various changes, the devs would be introducing a brand-new feature: a weekly auction that was

to be held every Monday. Players wouldn't be able to sell their items just yet, though, and this week's listings would only feature NPC items. Being short on cash lately, I hadn't given it much thought, but now that I had a solid chance of getting the items I wanted, I was starting to look forward to it.

"Gotta remember to set aside a bit of cash for the auction."

Who knows? I might find something amazing if I'm lucky. The auctions that were scheduled to start the day after tomorrow were split into two categories. The one taking place in the Town of Beginnings was a standard, in-person auction where players bid on the items they wanted on the spot. The other one was similar to an online auction, where players placed their bids on an auction site. Once their respective bidding periods were up, items would go to the highest bidders. I couldn't wait to check both of them out.

"Hope I can get something cool."

I headed to my farm, reviewing the different auction types on the way. My monsters were already hard at work when I arrived.

"Morning, everyone!"

"Mm-mm."

"...♪"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Growl!"

"Aye."

"Hum."

"Triii!"

Man, our family sure had grown. Even Olea had joined in the customary group salute, which made the whole thing seem even more striking. Naturally, I had to take a screenshot of them.

After that, we made several trips between the Town of Beginnings, the Eastern Town, and the village of Alf in order to take care of our daily tasks, buy essential supplies, and sell the items we had concocted. By now, we had our routine down pat, and the whole thing could be done in under two hours. That said, we did take slightly longer than usual today since we made a detour to get fermenting barrels and ingredients to use for brewing. I was excited to make cheese and yogurt with them.

"Okay, all set! Another day to grind hard in the dungeons!"

"Triii?"

"Sorry you can't come with us, but I trust you'll look after the farm while we're gone, Olea."

"Tri-triii!"

"Guess you like saluting too, huh? Don't forget to restock the farm stand too, okay?"

"Triii!"

To my amazement, Olea was also capable of restocking my farm stand. In a way, I supposed that counted as part of “farm management.” Since Olea could look after my farm stand as long as it was in the Town of Beginnings, I figured I would leave it there semipermanently from now on.

We set out on our journey, leaving Olea in charge of the farm. Not wanting to get caught up in any battles, we ignored every monster we encountered on our way to the Water Elemental Gate, running as fast as we could. Thanks to our expediency we arrived in under half an hour.

“Not fighting really makes the journey quicker, huh?”

“Hum!”

“Okay, okay. I’m coming. Quit pulling so hard.”

Reflet kept tugging at my sleeve, unable to contain her excitement. I couldn’t blame her—the Undines’ village was pretty much her hometown. We walked through the gate together, Reflet dragging me by the hand.

“Hi. We’re back.” I greeted the chief.

“It’s good to see you again.”

“Hum.”

Given that Sakura’s favorability score had gone up when I took her to meet the Sequoia Dryad, I figured the same would happen if I brought Reflet and Olto to see their respective parental figures. Reflet did look pretty happy as the Undine Chief patted her on the head. Still, we didn’t have much else to do here other than buying some food and the household objects I was after.

“Definitely buying the sprinkler, that’s for sure. As for the well...”

The well I was considering provided an unlimited supply of spring water, which was slightly better than normal well water. I already had a regular well on the farm, though. While it could be good for our crops, the soil quality on our farm was already near maxed out thanks to Olto’s skills. There was no point in buying the hydroponics pool either, seeing as none of us could use it yet.

“We’ll get the well some other time. Guess we’ll only need the sprinkler for now.”

Since we had Olea looking after our farm in the Town of Beginnings, I decided to install the sprinkler on our farm in the Eastern Town. In the end, I only spent 30,000 G in the Undines’ village.

“Eh, better than overspending.”

Our next stop was the Earth Elementals’ town. This was the part of our trip I was most excited about, mainly thanks to all the items on my shopping list. Once again, we ignored all the monsters along the way, cutting our travel time down to less than an hour.

“Hello, and welcome.” The Gnome Chief greeted us on the other side of the gate.

“Mm-mm!”

“Excellent. Plenty of spunk—that’s what I like to see.”

“Mmm!”

For all his lofty mannerisms, the chief looked like a child patting another, smaller child on the head. Olto seemed blissfully unaware of this, though, beaming from ear to ear. I supposed their relationship was akin to a twelve-year-old doting on his idolizing younger brother. That scene alone made the trip fully worthwhile.

“Right, let’s see... Kinda want all the household objects here, to be honest.”

I was particularly keen on getting the worm box that was supposed to improve your farm’s soil quality. The one drawback was that it only covered ten plots of land. At present, I owned a total of sixty plots. Even if I excluded the twenty plots allotted to my weed farm, that still left me with forty plots, which meant I would need four worm boxes altogether.

“I mean, I *can* afford them, but...”

Perhaps it was better to weigh all of my options before deciding. For starters, I wanted two compost bins, one for the Town of Beginnings and one for the Eastern Town. Those cost 20,000 G apiece. I figured I only needed one underground blackout farm and one mining machine each, seeing as they cost 40,000 G and 60,000 G respectively. Besides, I wasn’t entirely sure what sort of results to expect from the mining machine just yet. If I were to buy four worm boxes on top of that, that would bring my total to 220,000 G. Even if I added an earth crystal hoe to the mix, I’d still have roughly 500,000 G left.

“Cool. Still got plenty to spare.”

Having no other plans to spend money other than at the auction, I figured I might as well buy everything I wanted right now. No doubt I’d have a hard time getting my spending under control after this massive spree, though.

“All right! Let’s go set up these tools!”

“Mmm!”

“Oh, but maybe we should go check out the dungeon again before that.”

“Mm!”

If we attempted the Earth Elementals’ trial now, we could head to the farm after that to install our newly acquired goods while waiting for our HP to recover. That seemed like the most effective use of our time. My plan for today was to grind in the dungeon and obtain as many earth crystal drops as possible. We’d need to be quick, though; if

we took too long, night would fall.

“You guys ready for attempt number one?”

“Mm-mm!”

We cruised through the dungeon, defeating Deranged Earth Elementals, Stone Snakes, and Dark Bats along the way.

Unfortunately, while we snagged a fair number of drops, thus far we hadn’t had any luck getting earth crystals.

“Way to go, Sakura!”

“...♪”

“Let’s keep this up!”

Since evolving, Sakura’s advanced tree magic had become even more potent. One of her skills enabled her to summon thick vines from the earth, which she could use at will like whips to deliver powerful blows to our enemies. This ability was particularly effective against ground-type monsters, which were weak against tree- or grass-based attacks. Her other skill allowed her to produce about thirty pollen-spewing flowers that triggered a combination of poison, paralysis, and confusion—a move bound to come in handy in various situations. Individually, each status ailment only had a slight possibility of occurring, but since every effect had its own unique probability, the chances of triggering at least *one* of them were significantly higher. Plus, we didn’t have to worry about receiving damage ourselves since friendly fire didn’t apply to this skill.

“Pretty sure this is every allergy sufferer’s worst nightmare, though. Just looking at it makes me itchy.”

“...?”

Thanks to Sakura, we were able to cut our battle time in half, allowing us to progress through the dungeon much faster. That said, we had to be careful not to depend on her too often, lest she use up too much MP, which would mean having to dip into our limited supply of mana potions.

“Even so, I’d much rather have things be easier for us. Keep up the good work, Sakura.”

“...♪”

Faring better in the fights meant that we were now able to search the dungeon with more ease as well. While we discovered hidden passages in each room, we didn’t go into any of them just yet, merely checking the entrances before moving on. I intended on coming back once we had leveled up a bit more.

“Check this out—an iron ore! Alyssa said they were still pretty rare.”

Currently, iron ores could be found in specific mining points in Zones Four and Six as rare mineable items. However, they weren’t yet in wide circulation, thanks to several higher-level players

monopolizing them.

“Well, it’s not like we need any for ourselves. Let’s dig up the whole lot and sell them all.”

“Mmm!”

Steel equipment was way too heavy for me to wear, and none of my monsters needed iron ores either. As such, I had no qualms about parting with them.

“We’re counting on you, Lieutenant Olto.”

“Mm-mm!”

Olto gave me an exemplary salute before resuming work. With his high Mining skill level, he was able to dig up far more ores than me, and better quality ones at that. *Attaboy. You’re the mining expert.* That didn’t mean I was slacking off, though; I, on the other hand, had a skill called Gem Finder. Although I had yet to activate it, I was sure I’d be able to find a gem eventually. Just then, one of the mining nodes flashed—or so I thought. Had I obtained some kind of special item? Pulse racing, I checked my inventory to discover the following:

Name: Blue Quartz

Rarity: 3 / Quality: 2★

Effect: Ingredient. For decorative purposes only.

Well, what do you know? No sooner than I had hoped for it, my Gem Finder skill activated. The timing couldn’t have been better. I selected the item to take a closer look, and sure enough, I had obtained a blue-colored quartz the size of my thumb. Given that it only had a two-star rating, it wasn’t fully translucent, and seemed to contain some impurities. Nevertheless, it was still a sight to behold.

“Awesome. Hope this leads to even more cool items!”

“Mm-mm!”

We continued our exploration in high spirits, using our recovery items whenever we took any damage. Though we were slowly eating through our potions, I wasn’t too bothered; the pros far outweighed the cons. It was when we were exploring our fifth room, right after an intense match with two Deranged Earth Elementals and two Dark Bats, that I noticed Lewin had sent me a message. Evidently, the staff I had ordered from him a while back was complete.

“Just as well—we’re kinda running low on fuel anyway. Let’s get outta here once we’ve checked out the next room.”

“Mm-mm!”

“Okay, everyone. Get ready!”

We stepped into the next room to find none other than a green-haired Earth Elemental awaiting us. There was no doubt about it: it was a unique specimen. Weren’t their encounter rates supposed to be

way lower, though? Ultimately, however, this was all a matter of luck. Even in other games, getting an item with a less than one percent drop rate twice in a row wasn't unheard of; that was just life.

"Great! Today's our lucky day! I'll try taming it first, so don't defeat it just yet. Especially you three, Sakura, Rick, and Bear Bear. Got it?"

"...!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Growl growl!"

The fact that there was another Deranged Earth Elemental in the room made things slightly more challenging, but I was determined not to pass up this chance. Despite taking a fair amount of damage, we managed to defeat the regular specimen and deplete most of the unique specimen's HP. Now, it was just a matter of taming it.

"Tame! Tame! Guh! Tame! Tame! Ack!"

The Elemental resisted my attempts, but I persisted. Unfortunately...

"Damn it, it didn't work!"

In the end, I failed to tame the beast. It seemed like defeating it was our only choice, given how low our HP was. Still, I couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed, even though we were guaranteed a rare drop.

"Oh well. Let's get this over with."

In retrospect, I shouldn't have assumed we'd already won the fight. I foolishly fell into the Deranged Earth Elemental's pit, my already-low HP plummeting even further when I hit the thorns at the bottom. Even as my monsters tried to help me out, I could see the Earth Elemental charging towards us, face contorted in a menacing snarl. Things were looking grim. Frankly, we only needed one more blow to defeat it, but since I'd given orders not to kill the beast, none of my companions made any move to attack it. Although they were trying to form a wall around me, they were too far away, since they'd been focused on blocking the Elemental from escaping. *Shit, this was it! I was done for!* I was an idiot for underestimating unique monsters. Worse still, I had all my money with me, thinking I'd be safe from harm! *Why* hadn't I deposited it at the guild when I had the chance?! As I was busy beating myself up, something came between the Deranged Earth Elemental and me.

"Hum!"

"Refler!" I wailed as Reflet disintegrated into tiny particles of light before my eyes, having borne the brunt of the enemy's attack.

"Hum...!"

"Damn it! You bastard!"

Without missing a beat, I swung my staff at the hideous creature

in the few seconds Reflet had bought for me. It was a narrow escape, but finally, we managed to make it out of the dungeon.

“Man, that scared the shit out of me.” I breathed a deep sigh of relief once we were outside. “Come on, Reflet’s waiting for us.”

I’d also gotten a four-star earth crystal from our last encounter, which I decided to sell to Lewin when I met him. Before we headed to his place, however, we had to fetch Reflet. Since I’d chosen the Northern Town’s Obelisk of Return as our respawn point before we came here, we were able to meet up with her immediately.

“Hum!”

“There, there. Sorry for making you wait.”

“Hummm.”

“Thanks to you, we made it out in one piece, Reflet.”

“Hum-hum!”

Monsters were especially clingy after respawning. *Guess it gets pretty lonely waiting here all by yourself*, I mused while patting Reflet on the head, letting her cling to my leg until she was satisfied. Naturally, the rest of my companions were lined up behind her, waiting for their turn to be patted as well. I obliged, doing my best to ignore the other players’ blatant stares. *Come on, what else am I supposed to do?! Gotta communicate with your monsters, you know? Please don’t look at me like I’m crazy!*

“R-Right then. Lewin says he’s in the Northern Town, so let’s head there next.”

“Hum!”

Now that Reflet had rejoined our party, we were ready to go to Lewin’s stall. Apparently, he and Alyssa were doing business in the Northern Town today.

“Hi. Got your message,” I greeted him shortly.

“Hiya. That was quick,” he replied.

“Well, I was just grinding over in the Earth Elementals’ dungeon. Glad I could catch you in the Northern Town.”

“Yeah. Nowadays, I’m mostly based in Zone Five, but you can expect me to be here for a few days.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Ain’t it obvious? Because of the Earth Elemental Gate, what else? Did ya forget you’re the one who opened it?”

He had also stationed himself here to ensure he had an easier time buying items from players who’d explored the dungeon. Both monster drops and iron ores were ingredients he was eager to get his hands on as a blacksmith.

“Here ya go. Your staff, as promised.”

Instead of giving me my item via data transfer like he usually did,

Lewin handed it to me himself straight from his inventory. It was a beautiful staff, its handle a blue hue, as pure as clear spring water. The staff head bore an intricate design resembling a running stream intertwined with green branches. The blue water consisted of the same type of wood as the handle, while the green parts were made of a different material. From the looks of it, Lewin had carved and shaped each piece of wood individually, then woven the strips together like bamboo latticework. Lastly, the tip had a blue gemstone attached to it. The overall effect was breathtakingly beautiful—ethereal, even. No wonder Lewin looked so proud of himself.

Name: Blue Wood Staff

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 7★ / Durability: 240

Effect: Attack +8, Magic +49, moderate boost in water magic attack power, minor boost in tree magic attack power, minor water resistance.

Weight: 2

Not only was the staff an eye-catcher, but it was also extremely powerful. While it would no longer save me on energy when using water magic, its attack power had improved a great deal. It even provided a minor boost in tree magic, just as I'd requested, and the "Magic +49" effect didn't hurt either. This was everything I'd hoped for *and* more!

"The main ingredient's dogwood, but I also added some water ores plus giant fanged fish fangs and scales to increase its durability. The gemstone at the tip was made by fusing an Earth Elemental's shard with a marble I had," Lewin explained.

"Gotcha." I nodded. While I didn't understand the specifics of it, I could tell this was no ordinary wooden staff.

"It turned out slightly heavier than your previous one, though. That okay with ya?"

"Not a problem."

"Good to hear that. Also, here's your money for the stuff I didn't use," Lewin said, handing me about 3,000 G. "I used most of the materials ya gave me, though, so it ain't much."

"No, no, that's totally fine—more than fine, honestly!"

Not only had he made me a first-rate weapon, but he was paying *me* instead of the other way round? How could I possibly complain about that? Besides, there was no doubt that exploring dungeons would be much easier with this staff!

"Thanks for letting me use this, by the way," I said, returning the oak staff Lewin had lent me.

"Don't mention it. Feel free to come again if ya need anythin'."

“Will do!”

With that, we left his store. Though I was itching to test out my new weapon, I had to finish setting up the household objects I’d purchased earlier before that. First up was our farm in the Town of Beginnings.

“We’re back, Olea.”

“Trrrr!”

“I wanna put these somewhere on our farm. Where do you think would be good? Olto?”

“Trrrr?”

“Mm-mm?”

“Trrrr.”

“Mmm.”

Olea and Olto put their heads together, seemingly deep in thought. After some discussion, they beckoned me to follow them. They appeared to have a spot in mind.

“Tri-trrrrr.”

“Here?”

“Mm.”

Following Olto and Olea’s lead, I began setting up the items I bought. At first glance, the worm boxes looked like plain wooden crates. Given that I was prompted to select their coverage area upon installation, however, they seemed to be functioning properly. Next, I placed the blackout farm where my underground farm had originally been, essentially burying the old farm underneath the new one. After all, I no longer needed it. The great thing about this new item was that I could convert all twenty slots to an underground farm in exchange for using up one plot of land. Frankly, I felt like an idiot for spending all that time digging a hole.

In contrast, the at-home mining machine required ten slots of my weed farm. Despite that, I only got one copper ore from it. How often did this thing produce ores, anyway? If it only produced one per day, it could be ages before I got my money’s worth—definitely not worth the ten slots I had to sacrifice. It looked like I’d have to wait and see for a few days.

We then went to our farm in the Eastern Town and set up the remaining worm boxes, sprinkler, and compost bin. Since the sprinkler operated automatically, watering our crops would be a bit easier now.

“Right, let’s head back to the dungeon. Oh, hang on. Better go to the guild before that to deposit my money.”

I almost forgot again. After setting aside a modest sum for immediate use, I deposited the rest of my money for safekeeping. *There*. Now I wouldn’t have to worry even if I died—not that I intended to, but there was no telling what might happen. I didn’t want

another repeat of the Reflet incident.

“Okay, take two!”

“Hum!”

“You haven’t fully recovered yet, so stay back, okay?”

“Hum...”

Reflet lowered her fist sadly, deflating like a balloon. Whoa, why was she so eager to fight in the first place? Had she forgotten that she’d died not too long ago? Due to respawning, Reflet’s stats were operating at a limited capacity for the time being. Besides her attacks being less powerful, her defenses were also weaker, making her more susceptible to enemy damage. If she tried to act as a tank now, she’d be dead again in no time. For now, I figured it’d be best for her to support us from the rear, where she’d be safer. *Given that she also has healing, that role might actually suit her better...* It was only when we arrived at the Earth Elemental Gate that I remembered something important.

“Crap! I forgot to sell Lewin my earth crystal.”

I’d also forgotten to show him my iron ores and monster drops. I’d been so taken with my new staff that the other items had completely slipped my mind.

“Oh well, too late now. I’ll just have to wait until our next break.”

Chapter Six: The Earth Elementals' Guardian

"You ready to go all in on some more mining, Olto?"

"Mm!"

"Sakura, Rick, I'm counting on you guys to be our damage dealers."

"...!"

"Chirp!"

"Fau, stay back as much as possible since Reflet's out of commission."

"Aye!"

"As for you, Bear Bear, I want you to focus on tanking rather than attacking the enemy directly."

"Growl!"

It felt good acting as leader of such an enthusiastic and responsive group. Until Reflet was ready to get back in action, we had to do our best to fill in her shoes.

"All right, let's go."

This was our second time attempting the Earth Elementals' trial today. We proceeded with caution, even more so since we were one member short at the moment. As we already knew where the initial mining nodes were, it didn't take long to find them again. It also helped that my new staff was incredibly strong. My water magic was far more potent than it had ever been, and my Aqua Heal skill had also gained enhanced healing properties, which made clearing obstacles much easier. Previously, my contribution to the team had been marginal at best, but now I was suddenly the MVP. Lewin had done an amazing job. I had to be careful not to go overboard, though: using more magic naturally drained your MP faster. I'd have to make mana potions in larger batches from now on.

Unfortunately, our second attempt was less successful. Although no one died, we didn't encounter any unique specimens, and each room had more enemy spawns than the last time. We hardly got any rare drops either, let alone earth crystals. I guessed that was to be expected; if anything, we had been way too fortunate until now. This seemed more like how things were supposed to be. Once you'd experienced that sort of luck, though, it was hard to settle for anything less. *What can I say? Humans are greedy creatures.*

“Hmm... The results aren’t great, but maybe we should get going soon...”

As we trudged back to the exit, I suddenly got an incoming friend call.

“Who’s that? Hey, it’s Amelia.”

The call was from Amelia, the Tamer who had been on the same server as me during the Village Archdemon event.

“Forgot we’d exchanged friend codes.”

If I had to describe her in one sentence, I’d say she was a Tamer who was absolutely gaga about gnomes. To be honest, I was a bit hesitant to answer her call. After all, I’d sold Alyssa my information about the Earth Elemental Gate despite knowing how much Amelia loved gnomes. Now that the Cats had my info, I could no longer go around dishing out what I knew.

“Hello?” I answered hesitantly, feeling slightly nervous.

“Silver-Haired? Hi! Long time no talk.”

“Y-Yeah, it’s been a while. What’s up?”

“I’m looking for an earth crystal, so I decided to hit up everyone I know. You just happen to be the first person I called.”

“Huh? Why me?”

“Well, out of all my friends, you seem the most likely to have one.”

Seriously, what kind of person did she think I was? *Wait a minute, though*—she probably knew that I’d earned a ton of points during the event, so she might have thought that I’d exchanged them for a crystal then and hung on to it for whatever reason.

“Why now, though?”

Her call was too well timed to be a mere coincidence. Could it be that...?

“I need it for an event, you see. You might know about it already, though. Silly me, what am I saying? You *do*, don’t you? Of course you do! Why else would you have an Undine?!”

“How’d you know that?”

“Well, you and your monsters stand out a lot. Kinda hard to miss you guys. Plus, it’s easy enough to put two and two together once you have info about the Water Elemental Gate.”

“You got me.” I sighed. “Yep, I’m the one who found the Water and Earth Elemental Gates.”

“I knew it!”

From the sound of it, it seemed like everyone who bought info about the gates from the Quick-Eared Cats was able to deduce that I was the one who discovered them. While I didn’t mind other players finding out, this meant that the party who unlocked the Fire Elemental Gate had probably gotten wind of it too. When we ran into

each other at the Earth Elemental Gate, they hadn't realized who I was since I hadn't had my monsters with me. However, they would probably figure it out the next time we met; the chances of them having beef with me were pretty high. Oh well, that was nothing new. *What's done is done.* Luckily, the GMs were only a phone call away if they tried anything funny. Right now, my priority was to figure out how to deal with Amelia.

"You see why I need to enter the Earth Elemental Gate now, don't you?! I wanna—I *must*—get a gnome for myself! Gnomeeey! Squeee!"

"D'aah!"

I heard Amelia squeal over the phone, followed by a loud yelp. *Damn, girl, chill out.* Still, I should've known how she would react once she got word of the gate, given how much she adored gnomes. Now then, what was I to do with my earth crystal? *Should I just give it to her?* It wasn't as if I had any plans to use it. Furthermore, I didn't dare think of what would happen if she found out I'd kept it a secret from her later on—antagonizing a woman was the last thing I wanted to do. I still remembered the time our section manager had yelled, "Hey, tea lady!" at one of my senior female coworkers. Several months later, he... *Eek! Just remembering it gave me chills! I'd rather die than face the same fate as him!*

"Y-Yeah, I have an earth crystal."

"You do?! Yay!"

I hadn't said anything about *selling* it yet, though...

"You'll sell it to me, won't you? Hmm?"

Whoa. How'd she read my mind? Of course, I was happy to sell it.

"S-Sure thing."

"Thanks! By the way, what's its quality?"

"Four stars. That okay with you?"

"Squee! I love you! I mean, I don't *love* love you, but you're definitely my new favorite person, Silver-Haired!"

Oh wow. I hadn't expected her to confess her love to me. She really was hyped about this. I knew what she said didn't have any deep meaning, but it was still way better to be liked than hated.

"So, how much should I pay?" Amelia asked.

"Not sure, to be honest... What's the going rate?"

"Hmm, I'd say it's about 20,000 G multiplied by the crystal's star rating. It's bound to go up the more the news spreads, though."

"Right, gotcha."

"Which is why *we* are willing to pay 30,000 G instead of 20,000—yes, we are! How does 120,000 G sound, Your Honor?" Amelia suddenly started talking in a weird, oddly formal manner in her hepped-up state.

"N-No problem. That's fine by me. Where do you wanna meet

up?”

“Where are you now?”

“In the Earth Elementals’ town.”

“For real? Gosh, I’m so jelly! I wanna ascend to gnome heaven too!”

“I’m sure you do, so let’s hurry up and get this deal done.”

“Okay, we’ll head to the gate now, so how about we meet right outside?”

“Deal.”

If Amelia had just bought the information about the gates from Alyssa, she was probably in the Northern Town right now. In that case, it wouldn’t take her too long to get here.

“Cool. See you in a bit.”

“Be there ASAP!”

Perhaps not selling my crystal to Lewin had been for the best after all. I was more than happy to let one of my friends have it instead if it meant they got to enter the gate. Besides, I was sure Amelia would get ahead of me in no time, in which case I could ask her to share her findings with me later.

“All right, time to make a move, guys!”

“Mm-mm!”

I tried not to get held up on the way and keep Amelia and her party waiting. When I exited the Earth Elemental Gate, I discovered several parties waiting outside. Immediately, all eyes were on us.

“Check it out, it’s Silver-Haired.”

“So it *was* him.”

“Well, duh. Are you even surprised anymore?”

“Hey, let’s see whether he has any earth crystals left.”

They appeared to be people who had bought information from Alyssa. Judging how none of them seemed to be making a move to enter the gate, they most likely didn’t have any crystals. They had likely just come to verify the gate’s location. Before I had time to process what was happening, several players had surrounded us. I didn’t sense any malice or anger from them, though. If anything, they were all painfully polite, practically wringing their hands as they approached me.

“Um, you’re Silver-Haired, aren’t you?” one of them asked hesitantly.

“Huh? Uh, yeah. That’s me, all right.”

“Sorry to bother you, but would you happen to have any earth crystals?”

Bingo. Just as I thought. Unfortunately for them, I’d already promised my crystal to Amelia, which I had to break to them gently, referring to her simply as “a friend.” They didn’t press me any further

than that, plodding away reluctantly, shoulders slumped in defeat. As sorry as I felt for them, there was nothing I could do, though that didn't stop the nagging pang of guilt. As I sulked over what had just happened, I heard someone in the distance calling my name.

"Yoo-hoo! Silver-Haired!"

"Amelia! So good of you to come!"

"Oh, hi! Someone sure looks happy to see me."

Amelia had just arrived. I was so glad to see her that I found myself waving wildly, as though she were some long-lost friend. Thankfully, she didn't seem bothered by it, though a less forgiving woman might have reported me for harassment. *Whoops. Gotta be more careful next time.*

"Have you been waiting long?" she asked.

"Not at all. Just got here myself."

"Glad to hear that!"

"Are those your party members?"

"Yep. They're my Tamer friends."

Instead of her monsters, Amelia had brought three other players with her. To my surprise, I recognized one of them.

"Hey, Ivan. How's it going?"

"Not too bad. Good to see you again," he replied.

"Didn't know you two knew each other."

"What can I say? There aren't many of us out there." Amelia shrugged.

"We hang out in the forums quite often, plus we have meetups where we exchange info with other Tamers," Ivan explained.

Ah, no wonder. While there were plenty of players who possessed Taming skills, there weren't that many people who were pure Tamers. I supposed that made them a pretty tight-knit community. Not that *I'd* ever been invited to one of these swap meets! *But wait*—I rarely checked the forums, nor did I have many Tamer friends in the first place. Besides, even though I was technically a Tamer, I didn't really come off as one, so perhaps it was only fair that I wasn't invited to such gatherings. Seeming to sense the shift in my mood, Ivan quickly jumped in.

"Would you like to join us next time? We'd love to have you," he offered.

"R-Really? You don't mind if I join?" I perked up immediately.

"Huh? Of course not. It's just a shame we couldn't invite you last time since none of us had your contact info then."

"We'll message you for sure next time, so do join us!" Amelia chimed in. As it turned out, they hadn't excluded me on purpose after all. *Well. In that case, I gladly accept.*

"Hiya, I'm Ursula. Pleased to meet you."

The next person to greet me was an attractive young woman with black hair, who bobbed her head as she introduced herself. Ursula was dressed in a daring outfit that showed off her navel and the contours of her body, similar to what a dominatrix would wear. To top it all off, her weapon was a whip—if you told me she was role-playing as a “sexy villainess from an evil organization” I would not have been at all surprised. In a way, I supposed it was a pretty fitting outfit of choice for a Tamer, although I had a hard time trying not to stare at her too much. *Thank goodness she had a cloak on.* Despite her intimidating looks, she was incredibly friendly, flashing a toothy grin as she waved at me. I almost didn’t know how to handle this—I had been half expecting a haughty, “Oho ho ho!” type of laugh.

“H-Hi. I’m Yuto.” I returned her greeting.

“Sheesh, Ursula. Can’t you see you’re embarrassing Silver-Haired? Told you that outfit was too spicy,” the final player in the group drawled.

“It’s cool, though, isn’t it? I think it’s very Tamer-ish.”

“Well, as long as you’re fine with it. *I ain’t bothered...* If anything, it’s a real blessing. Ahem—where were we? Ah, of course. Hi, I’m Eulenspiegel. You can call me Eulen.”

Eulenspiegel was a blue-haired Half-Elf. Naturally, his avatar was as attractive as everyone else’s, but despite his princely guise, he struck me as more of a playboy.

“Man, I’m so jealous of you, Silver-Haired,” Eulen sighed.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you *mean*, ‘what do you mean’? You’re *surrounded* by tree nymphs and undines and pixies! I want a cute girl monster too!”

Yeah, I get it: you’re the type of guy that follows your heart’s desires. Regardless, he didn’t really come off as a perv; rather, he reminded more of a hard-core fan simping for his favorite idol or cute game character.

“This is the Earth Elemental Gate, though, so you can only tame gnomes inside. Sure this is what you want?”

“Positive. By taming a gnome, I’ll be one step closer to my dream of getting a cute fairy!”

So he was true to his desires *and* willing to work for what he wanted. I guessed that was sort of commendable. I decided to exchange friend codes with Ursula and Eulen as well. As a result, my circle of Tamer friends suddenly doubled.

“Now then. Ready to sell us that ‘stuff’ we discussed earlier?” Amelia grinned. Oho, so we were doing this that way, huh? *No worries, I get your drift.* I grinned back, giving her a knowing look in reply.

“Heh heh heh. Is *this* what you wanted?” I asked slyly, flashing

her a sneak peek of my glinting yellow earth crystal. I kept most of it covered with my other palm, only allowing her occasional glimpses. Amelia seemed to be digging my drug-dealer impression.

“Yes, that’s perfect! Lovely color you got there. Hee hee hee.”

“What can I say? It’s a bona fide earth crystal. Won’t go for less than 100K on the streets.”

“A-As long as I have this...I, too, can get a taste of heaven... Hee hee.”

“S-So that’s our gateway to paradise, huh...” Ursula panted heavily, having joined our little shenanigans. Dang, she was *really* good at acting. From the crazed look in her eyes to her ragged breathing, she had the role down pat. If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve believed she actually meant it. Meanwhile, Eulen and Ivan were giving us exasperated looks. *Relax, guys. It’s just a bit of harmless fun.*

Once we were done clowning around, I sent Amelia my earth crystal. As soon as she confirmed receipt of it, each of the group members sent me 30,000 G as promised. I hadn’t expected to get so much money again so soon.

“Finally, we can enter the gate... Mwa ha ha ha.”

“Heh heh. At last! The Gnome Search Party’s greatest wish is about to come true!”

Amelia and Ursula were beside themselves with joy. Oh, so they weren’t acting anymore. *Gnome Search Party, though?* What on earth was *that*?

“Hey, what are they talking about?” I asked Ivan and Eulen.

“Oh, that. The name pretty much says it all. It’s a group dedicated to finding gnomes.”

“Most of the members are female Tamers who’re smitten with your cute gnome, incidentally.”

“Huh? You’re saying *my* Olto’s the reason this group was formed?” I blinked.

“Well, duh. Do you even know how many fans he has?” Eulen sighed. *Come on, man, don’t look at me like that. I honestly had no idea.*

According to him, other than gnomes, undines, tree nymphs, and pixies, the only humanoid monsters that had been discovered so far were goblins and a few others, which weren’t exactly the cutest of creatures. Apparently, that was why so many people were interested in my monsters. However, now that people were starting to gain access to the Elemental Gates, there would likely be more gnomes and undines in the future. Since rumor had it that Fire Elementals were male humanoid monsters, it seemed safe to assume that Air Elementals would be female. In any case, elemental creatures would probably become more common in a week or so. Besides Tamers,

crafters with Taming skills would also be trying their hands at getting a monster for themselves.

“All right. Let’s go, guys!”

“Lead the way, Captain!”

Amelia and Ursula led the way, giddy with excitement as they opened the Earth Elemental Gate. Evidently, the special effects were also visible to the players who’d come to scope the gate’s location, as the event caused an immediate stir among them.

“Whoa! So *this* is what happens when you unlock it! Holy hell!”

“Aw shit! I forgot to take a screenshot!”

Ivan and Eulen were also staring at the gate, captivated by the sight. *Now then*. Seeing as we were friends now, I figured I might as well show them around inside.

“Say, why don’t we team up?” I suggested.

“Huh? You sure, Silver-Haired?” Ivan asked.

“Of course. The more, the merrier.”

“Yay! I get to hang out with the tree and water cutie-pies!” Eulen whooped. Together, we entered the gate, Amelia’s party chatting excitedly the whole way. However, things would only get even more heated up from here.

“Oh my god!”

“H-He’s adorable...!”

Upon meeting the Gnome Chief, Amelia and Ursula began shrieking with delight. Damn, they weren’t kidding about their love for gnomes. Although the chief looked a little bewildered, he welcomed us warmly nonetheless. While Ivan and Eulen listened to his speech in earnest, the women were busy taking screenshot after screenshot, their minds already elsewhere. *Was it safe to bring them to town?* I wondered. Could I actually be endangering the gnomes’ lives by doing so? They wouldn’t be so stupid as to stalk some poor innocent citizen, would they? Technically, they weren’t breaking any rules by taking photos of NPCs without their permission, but...I just hoped they wouldn’t try to kidnap one of them. If they did, though, one of the guards would probably put a stop to it. *As the saying goes, you reap what you sow.*

“Gosh, just look at his cute butt.”

“Ugh, what I would give to bury my face in his hair and huff it...” the two women whispered behind the chief’s back on our way to town. *Um*. That sounded...concerning.

“Psst. Ivan, Eulen. You better stop those two if things get outta hand, got it?”

“Huh? Why us?”

“Nuh-uh. That’s impossible.”

“Well, you guys have joint responsibility. They’re your teammates,

after all.”

“B-But this is just a one-off thing.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you’re in the same party *now*. I got nothing to do with this since I’m not part of your group.”

If push comes to shove, you guys are on your own.

“Hey, no fair! Cop-out!” Eulen protested.

“Heh heh heh. Welcome to the adult world.”

“Don’t pull that card on us!”

“It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there. Gotta know some street smarts if you wanna survive.”

Eulen and I exchanged a little banter along the way, and before long, we had arrived at the Earth Elementals’ town. There, Ursula and Amelia’s enthusiasm reached fever pitch. As if they hadn’t already been hyper enough, they were now practically uncontrollable, no longer bothering to show any restraint.

“Squeeeeeeee!”

“Oh my god! Gnome heaven! We did it! We finally made it to the promised land!”

“There, there, there, and there! Gnomes *everywhere*! It’s a true gnome paradise!”

“Gosh, I could live here forever! Do they sell houses here? I’ll pay whatever it takes—even sell my kidneys if I have to!”

“Oh gosh oh gosh, where do I even start?!”

“*Pant pant... Must...pat...gnomey...*”

Aaand stop! That’s definitely a red card, Ursula! I glanced at Ivan and Eulen, but they simply shook their heads with a resigned sigh. Admittedly, I wasn’t confident I could stop Amelia and Ursula either, but they could’ve at least tried.

“Anyway! Where should we go first?”

“You’ll show us around, won’t you?”

“I’d like somewhere we can meet some extra-cute gnomes, please!”

“What are you even talking about, Amelia? *All* gnomes are cute!”

“Y-You’re right!”

“We gotta huff all of them equally!”

Perhaps I shouldn’t have volunteered to be their guide so casually. Ursula’s behavior was especially worrying. At first, I thought she was an easygoing gal, but the way she looked at the gnomes in town was clearly the gaze of a sexual predator.

“R-Relax, I’ll give you a full tour of the place, okay?” I assured them.

“Yay! Thanks a bunch,” Amelia chirped.

“Oh, Olto honey? Would you like to hold hands?”

“Mm?”

Crap, I forgot Ursula could touch Olto now since we'd exchanged friend codes! W-Was he gonna be okay?

“Hnngh! How cute can you be...?!”

“No fair, Ursula! Me too!”

“Mm-mm!”

“You'll let me hold your right hand? Thanks, sweetie! You're such a gentleman, Olto!”

“What small hands...”

Olto was now sandwiched between the two women, holding both of their hands. Although the sight reminded me of that photo of a tiny alien captured by KGB agents, he appeared to be enjoying the attention. Ursula seemed to at least have enough sense not to try anything funny with someone else's tamed monster, even if she was staring at him like a madwoman.



“Don’t mind if I hold Reflet’s hand, th—”

“Oh no, you don’t!”

“Rats. At least I tried.”

Damn it, Eulen. Can’t take my eyes off you even for a second. I didn’t want to risk letting him near any of my girls, so he would simply have to make do with Bear Bear and Rick.

“Growl growl.”

“Chirp chirp.”

“Are you trying to cheer me up...?” Eulen sniffed. “Wait, this is actually kinda nice.”

Aha! I see you’ve been bewitched by Rick’s tail too! No one can resist that mighty floof once it touches their cheek!

“La di da...” Fau sang, strumming her lute while perched on Ivan’s shoulder. I didn’t mind that; unlike Eulen, Ivan had a pure heart. *Stop eyeing them so wistfully, Eulen! I won’t let you lay a single finger on her!*

“Right. Let’s start with the shops, shall we?” I turned to face the group.

“Thanks. That’d be great,” Ivan replied.

I showed the four Tamers around town, explaining what kind of items each stall offered. The last place I took them to was the store that sold household objects. For some reason, this seemed to interest them the most.

“Do you guys even have anywhere to put them?”

That was my main concern. I faced no issues since I owned a farm, but did *they* have houses or someplace they could install such objects?

“Not at the moment, but I am thinking of renting a house,” Ivan said.

“Mhm. Especially since we’re Tamers,” Eulen added.

I asked them what they meant by that. I hadn’t known this, but apparently, you could find houses and apartments for rent in Zones Three and beyond. Rental properties with gardens were especially popular among Tamers as you could keep your monsters there without having to send them to the Ranch. In exchange for their temporary ownership terms, these houses had fancier interiors by default. Moreover, players were allowed to remodel them as they saw fit. Some people rented houses to establish a base of operations, while others used them as a place for storage. That did sound pretty appealing. Although I could decorate the inside of my barn, I couldn’t change the layout or rearrange any furniture that came with it. Unlike houses in real life, rental properties in-game seemed to be highly versatile. Now that Ivan and Eulen mentioned it, I did notice a few indoor items for sale.

Meanwhile, Amelia and Ursula's eyes were glued to some garden gnomes. Though they came in various poses, they were purely for decoration only. *Come on, you guys are going to tame some real gnomes soon. What do you need a garden gnome for?* After a brief tour of the town, we finally headed to the Earth Elementals' trial.

"Hmm. Sure you'll be okay...?" I asked.

"Absolutely! No monster shall ever be able to withstand the fiery passion of our hearts!" Ursula declared with confidence.

"That 'passion' of yours is exactly what worries me..."

Hearing her earnest proclamation only fueled my anxiety. Initially, we had planned on splitting up after seeing the town. Being Tamers, it obviously made more sense for them to go fetch their monsters first before attempting the dungeon. Unfortunately, Amelia and Ursula were unable to wait that long, their need for gnomes overpowering all else. Despite not having their monsters with them, they began having a fit before the dungeon entrance, demanding that we go inside this instant.

"...Okay, fine." I gave in. "But I won't take responsibility for anything, got it?"

"Thank you!" Amelia beamed.

"Let our gnome-taming tour with Silver-Haired commence!" Ursula announced happily.

"Sounds like some kinda sightseeing bus tour."

"Do we have to pay for it?" Eulen asked.

"Nah. You can just give me the items you find."

"Sorry, I know it's a lot to ask. Thanks for helping us." Ivan, the most levelheaded member of the group, bowed in response.

"Not at all. Don't worry about it."

Ivan may have felt a bit guilty, but in all honesty, I had nothing to complain about. Not only were they willing to give me all the drops they obtained except earth crystals, but they also significantly boosted our overall combat power. If any of us got an earth crystal, we planned on selling them to other Tamers and splitting the money.

The order of taming remained undecided, the general idea being to make a mass taming attempt whenever we encountered a Deranged Earth Elemental. Anyone who successfully tamed one would abstain from doing so next time. We would keep grinding in the dungeon in this way until all four of them had managed to acquire a gnome. Given that they weren't farm owners, I doubted any of them actually needed a gnome. Still, everyone seemed to have their reasons for wanting one: Amelia and Ursula to have an adorable companion to dote on, and Eulen to fulfill his quest to obtain a tree nymph or pixie. Incidentally, when he learned that my Olive Treant hadn't evolved into a girl monster, he burst into tears. *Go figure.*

“Damn it!” he wailed.

“There, there. Anyway, you’ll need to grow it if you want it to learn Arboriculture. By the time it matures, you might find another way—you never know.”

“I-I mean, that’s gotta be the case, right?”

Or not. I had no idea. As for Ivan, he seemed to want his own farm for concocting potions and doing alchemy experiments.

“Actually, I was planning on using the Silver-Haired method.”

“Huh? The *what*? My method?”

“Yup. You’re a pioneer who managed to mass-produce potions by expanding your farm with your monsters.”

“A-Aw, shucks, you flatter me.”

In reality, it was all thanks to Olto; I had simply gotten lucky with my first monster. Still, it felt nice to receive praise for our work.

“Lately, some players have been having goblins help out on their farms by making them learn Farming skills.”

“Goblins, eh? I’ve heard about them, but I’ve yet to meet one myself.”

Most people tended to avoid goblins due to their realistic appearance. That said, they seemed to be popular among some male players, given that they were sort of a staple in fantasy settings. Besides, they looked like they would become fairly strong once they evolved; goblins and slimes usually became powerful after evolving, at least in light novels. *Who knows?* It was possible they could eventually become the strongest tamed monster of all. The fact that they were also pretty customizable was another reason goblins were popular. Other than their initial abilities varying widely, every ten levels players were able to select a new skill they could learn from a pool of roughly ten options. Though these were mostly basic skills, there was a certain appeal to having the freedom to choose.

“Goblins, huh? Interesting.”

The second the words came out of my mouth, Amelia pounced on me.

“No! Nuh-uh! Anything but goblins!”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Because! Anyway, you’re not allowed to tame goblins, okay?! Please don’t do it!”

“Seriously...?”

“There are plenty of monsters that are *way* cuter, so tame them instead!” Amelia begged. Well, it wasn’t as if I particularly wanted a goblin, seeing as I didn’t have many slots to spare. I wouldn’t be surprised if some people thought I only ever tamed creatures that looked cute. That would soon change once my Earth Dragon egg hatched, though: no one would dare think I was some kind of sleazy

cute-monster hunter if I had a cool dragon by my side.

“Ack! Why’d you hit me, Ursula?! Not that it hurt, but you gave me a shock!”

“You and your big fat mouth, that’s why!”

Sorry, Ivan. You totally didn’t deserve that.

“Relax. I got no plans to tame a goblin.”

“Really?” Amelia sighed with relief—perhaps a little *too* much relief.

“Cross my heart. I’m more than happy with these little guys.”

“By the way, I heard some players were banking on Honey Bears’ Cultivation skills, even though it’s not the most effective since you can’t propagate with it. Apparently, someone managed to get a Honey Bear that obtained Farming from a unique Honey Bee parent via Blood Skill. Their owner seems to be doing pretty well as a result,” Eulen said, changing the subject.

“Buying an egg just for that seems like too much of a risk, though.”

Monsters hatched from eggs inherited skills from their parents, a process known as Blood Skill. When they were born, monsters obtained anywhere from one to three randomly assigned skills. Naturally, monsters didn’t inherit duplicate abilities or skills they couldn’t use, as it would be pointless if a stationary monster like Olea got a skill such as Athletic. Regardless, you had to be extremely lucky to get the skills you wanted, which was why this was such a gamble. I’d been incredibly fortunate with Bear Bear. Honey Bears had six initial skills: Cuteness, Gluttony, Cultivation, Claw Attack, Sweet Scent, and Beekeeping. That meant Bear Bear had inherited Smelling, Climb, and Poison Resistance from their parents. Not only had they obtained the maximum number of inheritable skills, but they were also all fairly useful.

“Guess that makes Bear Bear a pretty special Honey Bear, then.”

“Agreed. Might not be a hit, but you definitely got a semi-hit.”

“Hit? Semi-hit?” I wasn’t familiar with those terms.

“Mhm. Eggs you can buy at each zone’s Magical Beasts Guild are either regular eggs or hits that give you slightly better monsters.”

Evidently, one of Eulen’s friends had once gotten a goblin with sword, spear, *and* archer skills.

“You got a hit once too, didn’t you, Ivan?”

“Yep. Just the other day, I got a really awesome Rabbicorn!”

As the name might imply, Rabbicorns were rabbits with horns on their foreheads, like a unicorn. Ivan told me he’d bought one after falling in love with its cuteness. When his egg hatched, he discovered that his rabbicorn had inherited Aquamotion, a skill its species normally didn’t learn. The definition of a “hit” was kind of vague, but

it usually referred to specimens that possessed exceptionally high base stats or blood skills that weren't inherited under normal circumstances. These special blood skills could only be acquired if at least one of its parents was a unique specimen that had learned a special skill. If you thought about it, the chances of that happening were pretty low. While Fau fit the criteria, even she hadn't inherited anything special.

The term "semi-hit" referred to specimens whose stats were slightly higher than those of regular ones, or those that had inherited three skills that were all useful. In that sense, Bear Bear was indeed more of a semi-hit than a full-on hit. *So what, though?* Bear Bear was adorable! In my eyes, they were a perfect ten out of ten.

"There it is! A Deranged Earth Elemental!"

"E-Ew, it's not cute at all... You're telling me *that's* what gnomes look like before they're tamed?"

"Y-Yikes."

"Sure is creepy..."

I'd been so lost in conversation with Eulen and Ivan that I hadn't realized we'd arrived at the first room. A single Deranged Elemental awaited us inside. We were in luck. Though the others were initially taken aback by its appearance, they soon recovered and began taming it. My monsters and I were responsible for depleting the creature's HP while they focused on their task.

"Come to me, gnomey! Tame!"

"You'll have a better life with me, sweetie! Tame!"

"Shall we?"

"Yeah, let's."

Ivan and Eulen shrugged as they joined the two women trying desperately to tame the Elemental. Unfortunately, as was the case in most games, the more you sought something, the less likely you were to get it. To Ursula and Amelia's great disappointment, the guys were quicker to tame a gnome, one each in this room and the next. Moreover, they each managed this within the first two tries, despite having lower Taming skills.

"Grrr! This is so unfair!"

"Next time... Next time for sure..."

Gah, stop being so jealous! You two look exactly like the monsters you're trying to tame! It's terrifying!

After enduring two hours of immense pressure from the women, we finally accomplished our mission.

"We'll be going now!"

"Thanks so much! I promise to return the favor someday!"

"Uh, no worries. See you around."

"Wait for me, my honey pie!"

“I’m coming for you!”

Amelia and Ursula skipped away, satisfied they had gotten what they were after. With the gnomes Ivan and Eulen had tamed earlier, their party was already full, so the gnomes the women tamed were automatically sent off to the Ranch. I was sure they were desperate to meet their gnomes, as they promptly ended our search once they were done taming them. Despite everything, I was glad that things had ended on a happy note, especially for Amelia and Ursula—remembering the way they’d glared at Ivan and Eulen still gave me chills.

“What about you guys?”

“We’ll be going too.”

“I’ll probably come back soon with my monsters once I’ve rested a bit.”

It seemed like the mentally drained duo was ready to leave too. No doubt they would return to grind in the dungeon after some rest and thorough preparation. I just hoped they didn’t meet another gnome fanatic on the way home.

“Right then... Thanks to those four, we still have plenty of health left. Should we go another round?”

Being much stronger than us, Amelia’s party had done most of the heavy lifting in the dungeon, so even though we’d spent ages inside, my team had used up very little energy, and I still had more than half of my MP left. That was just proof of how capable higher-level players like them were, with or without their monsters.

“You guys okay with that?”

“Mmm!”

Olto glanced around quickly before saluting on behalf of everyone. *Good. No objections, it seems.*

“All right, then let’s g—”

“Hello?”

As I was about to head back to the dungeon, I heard someone right behind me.

“Eek!”

The sudden greeting caught me off guard, causing me to very nearly jump out of my skin. After all, I’d never had an NPC actively approach me here, nor had I expected to run into any players. *Gosh, how embarrassing is that?*

“Y-Yes? Um, do I know you...?” I faltered. The person who’d approached me was a stunning blonde elf with a bow slung over her shoulder, dressed in a mostly beige outfit that consisted of a cropped jacket, tube top, and culottes. Overall, the look suited her really well. Her marker was blue, which meant she was a player, not an NPC. Who was she? Although she looked familiar, I couldn’t recall where I’d seen

her before. Was she a stranger after all, or had we perhaps participated in an event together? Considering the numerous monsters she had, she seemed to be a Tamer too. Surely I'd remember meeting a *Tamer*, though...

"Have we met before? I'm not trying to hit on you or anything, by the way," I quickly added.

"We sure have! If I remember correctly, I was with a large tortoise and bald eagle then. Ring any bells?"

A tortoise...and a bald eagle...?

"Oh!"

I was starting to remember in more detail now. I *had* seen her with a tortoise the size of a small car and a magnificent bald eagle!

"What were their names again...?"

"The tortoise is Nagamasa, and the eagle is Tadataka."

"That's right! I remember now. We met at the guild quite some time ago, didn't we?"

I recalled someone chatting me up in front of the Magical Beasts Guild back when I'd just received my title, the Silver-Haired Pioneer. In a way, I had her to thank for alerting me to Mirei's wrongdoings before things got out of hand.

"Yup, that's me! So you remembered!"

"Sorry I forgot to introduce myself then. I was kinda in a hurry."

"No hard feelings." She waved off my apology. "Anyone would panic if they found out their personal info was being leaked."

Phew. Thank goodness she didn't seem mad about it, even though I'd cut our conversation short and left abruptly at the time. Moreover, she seemed to understand why I had done so.

"Besides, I've been meaning to apologize to you." she continued.

"Huh? What for?"

"Remember how I called you the Silver-Haired Pioneer, even though we'd just met? I had no idea you actually hated your title. I felt kinda bad about it when I found out from other people later."

Had she really called me that? Honestly, I didn't even remember. That was awfully earnest of her.

"Hey, don't worry about it. I'm used to it by now."

"Okay. Thanks for being a good sport."

"I'm Yuto. Most people call me Silver-Haired nowadays anyway."

While I used to loathe my moniker in the past, I no longer minded people calling me that; it seemed like almost everyone I met addressed me that way.

"Yeah, I know. I'm Amimin, a Tamer."

"What?"

The minute I heard her name, I froze in shock. *Amimin? The super famous top Tamer, Amimin?* Her monster encyclopedia was practically

every Tamer's bible. *No freaking way.*

"You're Amimin?"

"That's me."

"...Huh?"

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"S-Sorry...! My brain stopped working for a second. You're *the* Amimin?"

"Not sure I know which Amimin you're referring to..."

"Amimin, the top Tamer and ex-beta tester who made that amazing website?"

"Well, when you put it that way, it feels kinda embarrassing. But yes, that would be me, I think."

"N-No way! An actual celebrity, in the flesh! I check your website all the time!"

This was probably the first time I'd met such a prominent player. While Alyssa and Ashihana were also somewhat famous, my view of them was sort of biased due to the fact that we were friends. However, Amimin was in a whole nother league. Even before the game's official launch, she'd already established herself as a force to be reckoned with, not to mention she was a fellow Tamer.

"Thanks. I check the forums a lot for your updates too. I'd say *I'm* the one who's lucky to bump into a famous player like yourself."

D-Did the great Amimin actually know about little old me? *Holy crap!* I never imagined I would actually be glad to have this title!

"Don't be crazy! You're, way, *way* more famous than I am! I'm just a weirdo known for his joke title and unconventional playstyle!" I protested.

"And I'm just your average Tamer who's been playing this game for a bit longer than everyone else."

"Average? Anything but."

"It's true, though."

"Please, no need to be modest."

"No, really—"

"*Ahem.*"

Someone cleared their throat loudly behind us, clearly annoyed at the endless loop we were stuck in. I turned around to find a woman staring at us impatiently. She was also attractive, albeit in a different way from Amimin—tall, with rich brown skin, green almond-shaped eyes, and long, dark gray hair. She appeared to be a Dark Elf, and her outfit reminded me of a gunslinger in a Western movie. Her piercing, partially hidden gaze and unkempt hair only accentuated her rugged appearance all the more.

"The hell are you guys doing?" she barked. The woman was a Summoner named Mattsun, who appeared to have accompanied

Amimin on her journey here. As it happened, she and Amimin were friends, both in-game and in real life. I had to admit she was pretty badass, what with her gruff, macho speech and the cigarette dangling from her lips. *That's right*—she was smoking a cigarette. I hadn't even known they existed in this game.

"Oh, this? I made it myself," she said casually. "Needed something to scratch the itch, you know."

"Mattsun's a heavy smoker," Amimin explained.

"W-Wow. I'm impressed."

Imagine going to such lengths. I had severely underestimated how determined smokers could be.

"Want one? As a token of our new friendship," Mattsun offered.

"No thanks, I don't smoke." I declined politely. "Besides, I'm not sure how it'll affect my monsters."

"Right, forgot you're a Tamer. For the record, my cigs are nontoxic and unscented, and Amimin's monsters don't seem bothered by it. Better to be safe than sorry, though. If you ever feel like trying one, just hit me up, although I can't spare too many at the moment."

Unlike real cigarettes, Mattsun's appeared to be nicotine free. Regardless, they were a hit among heavy smokers since they allowed them to mimic the feel of smoking. According to Amimin, Mattsun was something of a celebrity among players who smoked, who looked up to her and revered her as the Smoky One or Cig Almighty. *Wow.* I hadn't met someone with a more embarrassing nickname than mine in a while. Incidentally, if a minor ever tried to smoke in-game, their cigarette would disappear instantaneously, followed by a violent coughing fit. Like alcohol, the game had measures set in place to ensure people complied with the law.

"I'm Yuto, a Tamer. Some people call me Silver-Haired," I introduced myself. Mattsun's eyes immediately widened.

"Whoa! You're *the* Silver-Haired? Talk about a historical moment! Imagine, Amimin and Silver-Haired, the two top Tamers, finally meet in person!"

Top Tamers...? Please, Mattsun. Only one of us is worthy of that title. Perhaps that was her way of teasing Amimin; they did say they were friends after all.

"Don't be ridiculous, Mattsun. I'm not a top anything. I don't log in regularly, and besides, I'm not even on the front lines."

"Exactly. And I just play a little differently than everyone else, that's all. It's not like I'm doing things intentionally either—they just sort of happen."

"Y-You guys can't be serious— On second thought, that sorta explains it."

"Why're you nodding to yourself all of a sudden?" Amimin eyed

Mattsun curiously.

“Nah, don’t mind me. Just figured out the secret to making it big in-game, is all.” She nodded, glancing back and forth between us. Maybe I wasn’t one to talk, but she sure was an oddball. But never mind that—now was my chance to get closer to the great Amimin! *If things go well, she might even let me be her f-friend!*

“Erm. If you like, I can show you guys around town,” I offered, keeping my tone casual so as not to give away my true motives. First, I had to get chummy with them! By offering to be their tour guide, I could hopefully make a good first impression and then some.

“Ooh, that’d be great!” Amimin nodded happily. “Are you sure, though?”

“Oh yeah, absolutely. It’s not like I have anything else to do right now!”

“What do you think, Mattsun?”

“Sure, why not?”

This, by now, was my third time giving a tour of the Earth Elementals’ town, and I knew the place like the back of my hand. I made sure to engage in small talk with the pair as I guided them around town like an old pro. During our conversation, the topic of Mirei, the player who’d sold my personal info without my consent in the past, came up. I was surprised to learn from Mattsun that not only had she been punished by the devs, but the person who’d reported her was none other than Amimin herself.

Apparently, Mirei had told Amimin about me as a tip for buying potions from her stall. At the time, however, she’d assumed I had to have consented to it since she didn’t think someone would disregard the rules so blatantly. That said, she did find Mirei’s manner of advertising pretty malicious, which had prompted her to file a mild complaint to the devs.

By pure coincidence, she had then run into me at the Magical Beasts Guild. Convinced that I was the Silver-Haired Pioneer, she had decided to approach me, given that I was also a Tamer. Obviously, she hadn’t known my name at the time, so it only made sense that she would refer to me by my title; to her, a unique title was something worth celebrating, even if it was an ignominious one. Moreover, since she’d been under the impression that I’d given Mirei permission to spread my info, she had thought I’d wanted my title to be widely known. However, after seeing how I’d rushed off in a panic, she realized that Mirei hadn’t obtained my consent after all. She’d then contacted the devs again, who had already started investigating the issue based on her previous report, and the rest was history.

“You totally saved my ass, Amimin! I owe you big-time!”

“Don’t mention it. I only did what was right.”

“If you weren’t a Tamer, though, Amimin might not have filed a report that quickly. After all, she’s super shy. She kept tripping over her words when talking with the devs.”

She did all that for me...?! *What a saint!* Did Mattsun say she was *shy*, though? Although I found it hard to believe, that seemed to be the reason the two had come here on their own instead of in a larger group. While Amimin had no problems warming up to other Tamers, she immediately clammed up around other people, to the point where it affected her performance in-game. When they put it like that, her social anxiety did sound pretty crippling.

“Other than a handful of Tamers, I’m pretty much her only friend,” Mattsun concluded.

“And what’s wrong with that? I get by just fine, don’t I?” Amimin pursed her lips. I had to admit, she was pretty cute. She was like the female version of Sawyer: short and exuding a kind of little-sisterly charm that made you want to protect her. I didn’t blame Mattsun for not being able to leave her alone. Seriously, what was up with every elf I met having such natural charisma?

“Why didn’t you invite your Tamer friends to accompany you then?” I asked.

“I did, but Amelia and Ursula had already been inside the gate.”

“It ain’t like Amimin can strike up a conversation with those guys hanging outside either. That’s why it’s just us two. For real, though, you really oughta make more friends.”

“Look who’s talking, Mattsun.”

“Oh, I have plenty. I just don’t get in touch with them much ‘cause I know it’ll make you uncomfortable.”

“Grr... Hmph.”

Could this be my chance to befriend them? I decided to suggest exchanging friend codes, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“Well, *I’m* a Tamer. Does that mean you’ll be my friend?”

“Hm? Yeah, sure thing.”

Whoa! That was quick, not to mention really nonchalant! Did she actually have trouble interacting with non-Tamers? But whatever—the important thing was that Amimin had agreed to my request. *Best send her my friend code before she changes her mind.* And just like that, I had become friends with Amimin and Mattsun. To some people, it might not have seemed like a big deal, but my inner fanboy was over the moon. *Could you blame me, though?!*

“Well, that’s pretty much it for the town. What do you say we go to the dungeon next?”

“Sounds good. It’s nice to know you have our back, Yuto.”

“Nah, I should be the one thanking you. Having you two on my side feels really reassuring.”

“Oh, you.”

“No, you.”

“Good grief, not *this* again.”

Judging by her behavior, Amimin had to be a working adult in real life, although I wasn't sure how well she coped, given her social anxiety. This was my third time attempting the Earth Elementals' trial today. Once upon a time, I would've been worried about how we'd fare in our slightly depleted state, but not now. Being top players, Amimin and Mattsun were both ridiculously strong. I could scarcely believe how fast we were making progress; we essentially steamrolled our way through the dungeon. I did my best to contribute lest I become a leech, which wouldn't have been hard given the circumstances. Although Amimin had chosen small monsters to better navigate the dungeon, all three of them were evolved species with an immense amount of firepower.

Additionally, Mattsun was able to summon equally powerful monsters. This was the first time I'd seen a Summoner in action. By summoning a monster suitable for the occasion, she was able to hit our opponents right where it hurt the most every time. Before long, we had surpassed my personal progress record and waded into uncharted territory. On the way, Mattsun tried to form a contract with a gnome, but sadly, she was unable to select it as a target. Evidently, gnomes were Tamer-specific monsters.

“Does that mean...undines are off limits too? Ha ha...ha.”

Mattsun looked crestfallen. So she was more so a fan of undines than gnomes. While I felt bad for her, there was nothing I could do. Shortly after that, she succeeded in obtaining a Stone Snake, although that wasn't enough to heal her broken heart completely. She remained silent for a while. *Gnomes for Tamers and Stone Snakes for Summoners, eh? Well, it's obvious who's winning here!* Amimin, on the other hand, made no move to tame a gnome. Did she not want one for herself? Was she just after their drops? I was soon proven wrong, though.

“Hey, that one has different colored hair. Maybe it's a unique specimen.”

“Finally! Mind if I tame it, Yuto?”

Amimin appeared to have been after a unique specimen. *Aha, now I get it.* To become a top player, you had to be more selective about what monsters you tamed. That was a good pro tip to know.

“Yeah, of course. Go ahead.”

“Thanks. All right, guys. Be careful not to defeat it, okay?”

“Ribbit!”

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

“Hiss!”

Musashi the Tolerant Toad, Koasa the Doodle-Doo, and Dōsan the

Viper all responded to Amimin's command with enthusiasm. While it was clear she was most fond of normal animals, she didn't seem to limit herself to those monsters necessarily. Once we had depleted a significant amount of the gnome's HP, it was time for me to play my trump card. Thanks to Amimin and Mattsun, I still had plenty of MP to spare. I went ham with my Hold Back skill, exercising the utmost caution so as not to kill the creature. All Amimin had to do now was tame it. Her skill appeared to be highly advanced, as she managed to tame the unique specimen in only about ten tries. That was to be expected: she wasn't known as the top Tamer for nothing.

Curious to see if her gnome was any different from Olto, I asked her if I could take a look at its stats. What I saw made me gasp in surprise. "Different" didn't even begin to describe it.

Name: Torque / Race: Gnome / Base Level: Lv. 15

Master: Amimin

HP: 45/45 / MP: 49/49

Strength: 10 / Endurance: 10 / Agility: 7

Dexterity: 13 / Intelligence: 16 / Sanity: 10

Skills: Propagation, Heavy Bo Staff Skills, Hydroponics, Earth Magic, Farming, Mining, Night Vision

Equipment: Earth Spirit's Hoe, Earth Spirit's Scarf, Earth Spirit's Garments

To my amazement, Amimin's gnome possessed Hydroponics instead of Arboriculture. It seemed like unique monsters' special skills varied from specimen to specimen. *Dang*. I would be lying if I said I wasn't jealous—that was the skill I wanted the most right now. Amimin showed no surprise when I informed her that Torque's skills were slightly different from Olto's; she seemed to know that already. Apparently, it was a well-known fact that Olto had Arboriculture. Moreover, Amimin was the one who had discovered that individual variation existed in unique monsters' skills and sold that knowledge to the Quick-Eared Cats. No wonder she knew all about it.

Seeing Amimin's gnome's stats made me determined to tame the next unique gnome I met. That said, there was no guarantee I would encounter one that possessed Hydroponics; for all I knew, I could get yet another gnome that had Arboriculture. Still, there was no harm in trying, especially as Hydroponics was a skill I considered a must-have. Unfortunately, things rarely turned out the way you hoped—even more so when you actively pursued them. Instead of taming a unique specimen, I ended up defeating a bunch of regular gnomes, which did level Olto up.

“Your tamed monster, Olto, has reached level 25. Your monster is ready to evolve. Please choose a new evolution from your status menu.”

For gnomes, the evolution threshold appeared to be level 25.

“S-Sorry, can you guys give me a second?”

“Of course. Evolution’s a super special occasion. Take all the time you need!” Amimin beamed.

“I’ll take a smoke break in the meantime.” Mattsun nodded.

“No, no, I won’t keep you waiting that long. It’ll only take about ten minutes. If you don’t mind, though, I’d like some advice.”

“Sure thing. Ask away!”

While Mattsun began taking a drag on her cigarette, Amimin peered over my shoulder at my status menu. It felt extremely reassuring to know I could get her input. Now then, what evolution options did Olto have?

“Hmm, let’s see. Looks like my options are Gnome Farmer, Knocker, Gnome Fighter, and Gnome Leader.”

“Wow, that’s a lot.”

If I remembered correctly, Amimin’s website had listed Gnome Farmers and Knockers as the regular evolution routes for gnomes. There appeared to be a few changes since the beta version, though; while the advanced skills remained the same, the skills obtained upon evolution seemed to be different in the official version.

If I chose Gnome Farmer, I could expect an overall stat increase as well as advanced Farming skills. Furthermore, their Heavy Bo Staff Skills and Earth Magic would gain specialized status, something I had never heard of until now. This meant the above would transform into skills meant specifically for farming. Additionally, Gnome Farmers would be able to learn two more skills. In beta, players could only select Forced Cultivation or Watering, but the official version appeared to have more available options. According to the list, I could choose from the following: Transplantation, Arboriculture, Forced Cultivation, Hydroponics, Soil Amelioration, and Land Reclamation. *H-Hydroponics?! Sign me up, please!*

“Now, now, don’t be rash. Why don’t you take a look at the other options first?”

“Y-You’re right. Thanks.”

Whew, that was close. I’d almost chosen Gnome Farmer without any further thought. Thank goodness Amimin had more sense than I did.

The next option, Knocker, referred to a type of sprite that worked in the mines. As lore suggested, Knockers specialized in mining. In addition to their Mining, Heavy Bo Staff Skills, and Earth Magic gaining advanced status, they also learned two new skills called Atypical Extraction and Gem Finder. Atypical Extraction was a skill

that enabled you to find ores that were undetectable under normal circumstances; Gem Finder was a skill I already had. Both were abilities that gave the user a very slim chance of discovering special items. Perhaps most important of all was the fact that this evolution form made combat truly possible. Unlike regular gnomes, Knockers were capable of using their Earth Magic and Heavy Bo Staff Skills for fighting. As enticing as that was, I didn't feel that was the right choice for Olto.

"Next up is Gnome Fighter."

"That's probably the max favorability score evolution form. What are its stats like?"

"Lemme check... Wow, looks like you get an additional eight points for Strength. They also learn combat skills."

Aside from acquiring advanced status for their Earth Magic and Heavy Bo Staff Skills, Gnome Fighters were able to learn advanced Shield Skills, Charge Ramp-Up, and Endure. Though intriguing, this didn't feel right either. I didn't intend for Olto to excel in fighting anyway.

My final option was Gnome Leader, a route reserved for unique specimens. This was the one I'd been looking forward to the most.

"Ooh, interesting."

"Wowza. Unique evolutions sure are something else."

Gnome Leaders gained advanced Farming and Mining skills plus specialized Earth Magic. Additionally, they acquired the skill Guardian by default as well as one of the following: Transplantation, Arboriculture, Forced Cultivation, Hydroponics, Soil Amelioration, Land Reclamation, Atypical Extraction, and Gem Finder. As expected, they didn't learn any skills that would allow them to engage in direct combat. Guardian was a pretty intriguing ability, though, and evidently a skill Shield Masters and the like learned when they underwent a class change.

Guardian: Added bonus when deflecting attacks and shielding with weapons. Defense increases in proportion to the number of party members. User is able to Provoke when Guardian is in effect. Resistance to Blow Away and Flinch.

From the looks of it, it seemed like this evolution made gnomes stronger tanks. Better yet, I had the option of choosing Hydroponics for my second skill slot. I was liking the sound of it more by the minute. While Gnome Leaders didn't have direct fighting skills, they had the best of both worlds: Gnome Farmers' agricultural skills and Knockers' mining skills. I supposed you could also argue that this

made them half-assed monsters, but... Still, it did offer the best stat increase, so I made up my mind to go with this evolution. Amimin seemed to think that was the best option too.

“All right, let’s go with Gnome Leader!” I announced.

“Mm-mm-mm!”

A bright light engulfed Olto as he began his transformation. This was what his stats looked like after evolving:

Name: Olto / Race: Gnome Leader / Base Level: Lv. 25
Master: Yuto
HP: 71/71 / MP: 79/79
Strength: 16 / Endurance: 16 / Agility: 13
Dexterity: 19 / Intelligence: 20 / Sanity: 15
Skills: Arboriculture, Propagation, Luck, Bountiful Harvest, Heavy Bo Staff Skills, Earth Magic (Specialized), Farming (Advanced), Mining (Advanced), Night Vision, Forced Cultivation EX, Guardian, Hydroponics
Equipment: Earth Spirit’s Hoe, Earth Spirit’s Scarf, Earth Spirit’s Garments

“Hmm. Your outfit got a bit snazzier, but otherwise you don’t look that different.”

“Mm?”

Unlike Sakura, Olto showed no changes in stature. However, his scarf and garments were slightly spiffier, and the collar and hems of his outfit were subtly embroidered. Whereas he’d resembled a farmer’s son before, he now looked more like a merchant boy.

“How you feeling, buddy?”

“Mm-mm!”

Olto swung around his hoe, which also bore a subtle engraving on it, and struck a pose in his usual carefree and cheerful manner. Thank goodness he was the same old Olto on the inside, even if he’d evolved into a “leader.” While his gear was the only difference that was immediately obvious, the other changes would soon become apparent once we returned to our farm. *That’s right*—Olto had finally obtained my long-sought-after skill, Hydroponics. *Wait for me, hydroponic pool! I’m coming for you!*

“Since your Mining skills are more advanced now, I’m counting on you to work hard in here today.”

“Mmm!”

Shortly after, I put Olto’s abilities to the test—now that he had evolved, they were nothing short of incredible. To begin with, his defenses had increased considerably due to his Guardian skill. Even

though he was more likely to be targeted as a result of its provoking effect, it still offered him immense protection. He had also gotten better at deflecting attacks with his hoe and suffered noticeably less damage than before. Moreover, he was excellent at holding his ground since he was resistant to Blow Away effects. Even if he couldn't deal damage to our opponents, his performance as a tank was faultless. Additionally, his Mining (Advanced) skill enabled him to mine more rare materials. Given the increase in quantity and quality, I surmised that the items he obtained were nearly doubled in value from the norm. I couldn't wait to see his Farming (Advanced) skill in action.

"Attaboy, Olto!"

"Mm-mm!"

Thanks to this wonderful addition to our team balance, our journey through the dungeon was smooth sailing. Presently, we arrived at an enormous room unlike any of the others we'd seen so far. It was as spacious as a gym, with colorful quartz protruding from the ceiling and walls. At the very back was an exceptionally large, white piece of quartz. It was plain to all that this was no ordinary room.

"Wonder what this place is?" I looked around curiously.

"Beats me. It's really pretty, though," Amimin commented.

"Mm-mm!"

"Wait, stop. Gotta be more careful in places like th—"

Ker-thunk!

Sorry, Mattsun. We're too late. The moment Olto trotted over to the center of the room, the entrance was suddenly sealed. Something was *definitely* about to happen. As I steeled myself, the giant white quartz embedded in the wall started to pulse. Little by little, it vibrated more intensely, until finally, it began glowing red. The light danced inside the quartz as though it were alive, gradually transforming into a large magic circle. Several seconds later, the circle was complete, followed by a sudden blinding flash of light.

"Whoa!" I closed my eyes instinctively. Just then, I heard a low, menacing growl. It sounded as though it was coming from some sort of animal...or *was* it?

"RRAAAUUGGHHH!"

When the light subsided, an enormous beast stood before us. The creature stood on all fours and resembled an anteater. However, where there should have been fur, there was a hard gray shell, much like that of a crustacean, which covered its back and legs. It also had a long, lizard-like tail with a tip shaped like a mace. The creature was called an Earth Elementals' Guardian and had a red marker visible above its head: it was a boss monster.

"It's a boss! Guess we ain't got a choice. Brace yourselves, everyone!"

“Let’s go, guys!”

Mattsun and Amimin immediately got into formation, readying themselves for battle. I quickly followed a split second later, gripping my staff as I gave out instructions to my monsters.

“Olto, I’m counting on you to work your magic!”

“Mm-mm!” he grinned fearlessly, hoe at the ready. *That’s my boy.* Thus began our battle against the guardian.

“Bear Bear, Rick, Sakura, feel free to attack whenever you see fit!”

Thanks to Olto, the others were able to focus on attacking with much more ease.

“Growl growl!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“...!”

First, we tried attacking the beast directly without using any magic. Unfortunately, the creature’s shell proved too tough for us to break. Although our blows weren’t entirely ineffective, their impact was negligible when compared to Amimin and Mattsun’s party.

“Guess physical attacks are a nope for us... Okay, we’ll focus on support instead! Fau, Reflet, make sure to assist Amimin’s party too!”

“Aye!”

“Hum!”

Not only was the boss unyielding, but it was also powerful, able to deal erratic midrange attacks using its long tongue and tail. Furthermore, it was capable of using earth magic and fairly swift in its movements. If it weren’t for Olto, my team would have already been dead, cheering Amimin and Mattsun on from town instead.

“Rraaaauugghhh!”

“Mm-mm!”

Thank god we encountered the boss *after* Olto had evolved! With Olto’s protection, I managed to survive and continue assisting Amimin and Mattsun’s party. Sakura’s advanced tree magic also came in incredibly handy, as she was able to deal a moderate amount of damage and inhibit the boss’s movements intermittently.

“Less than fifty percent left! Don’t let the bastard recover, Amimin!”

“Obviously! We got this!”

None of us had died yet, and we had the upper hand so far. Naturally, we hadn’t made it this far without having to use a ton of recovery items and healing magic, but at least our fight was going smoothly.

“At this rate, we might be able to overpower it,” I muttered out loud like a fool. Of course, I should’ve known things wouldn’t be that easy. When its HP was down to the final thirty percent, the boss’s attack patterns changed drastically. It balled up like an armadillo and

ceased to move from the spot, countering our attacks with earth magic instead. Long-range magic attacks were mostly useless against the boss now that it was in full-on defense mode; Rick's nut bombs were the only thing that proved somewhat effective, and only marginally so.

"Hmm, looks like we got no choice. Guess it's time to bring out the big guns."

"Agreed. The timing seems about right."

"Mind distracting the guardian for us, Silver-Haired?"

"Roger that! Olto, Rick! Provoke the bastard!"

"Mm-mm!"

"Chirp chirp!"

Amimin and Mattsun appeared to have something up their sleeves—some sort of trump card. My companions and I worked on drawing the boss's attention away from the women, luring it into turning its back on them.

"La di da da...♪"

Olto and Rick darted in front of the beast while Fau strummed her lute, singing melodiously. Unfortunately...

"RRAAAUUGGHHH!"

"Wh-What was that?"

The next thing I knew, the guardian had opened its mouth wide and swiveled its head, its gaze clearly fixed on me. I could see the back of its throat starting to glow. It was clearly concentrating some kind of energy, perhaps to fire a wave-motion-gun type of attack. An instant later, a bright red ray of light shot forth from its mouth.

"Mm! Mm-mmm!"

"Olto!"

Damn, buddy! To my utter amazement, Olto deflected the guardian's laser beam with his hoe, softening the blow. The scene reminded me of mecha anime, where field barriers could repel laser weapons. Although he had taken some damage, everyone else remained unscathed. That was *some* hoe.

"That was amazing!" I yelled, thoroughly impressed.

"Mm..."

The guardian wasn't easily deterred, though—this was no ordinary monster we were dealing with.

"RRAAAUUGGHHH!"

"N-No way... Another one?"

"Mm...mm..."

Olto's eyes were filled with despair as he glanced over his shoulder, motioning me to run. He seemed resigned to the fact that he was incapable of deflecting the next blow. Were we doomed? Did I have no other choice but to sacrifice Olto if I wanted to live? *Please...* There had to be *something* I could do...! *An item, a secret weapon,*

anything!

“Damn it!”

Who was I kidding? As if a lifeline would suddenly present itself so conveniently...

“...!”

“Huh? Sakura?”

As I was bemoaning my powerlessness, Sakura stepped forward noiselessly. Her entire body was bathed in a bluish-white light, similar to when she evolved. I found myself unable to take my eyes off the ethereal sight.

“...!”

The moment Sakura stretched out her right hand, the light from her palm began to envelop Olto, healing his damage before my very eyes. Was this some kind of recovery spell? That didn’t seem to be the only effect it had, though.

“Gnaaarrr!”

“Mm-mm-mmm!”

The beast had unleashed its second attack. Olto gripped his hoe like a bat and swung with all his might, like a major league baseball slugger. Sparks flew as his black hoe clashed with the red laser beam.

“What in the world...?”

Based on the first blow, I’d expected the two to be closely matched in terms of strength. It appeared that the light Sakura had blessed Olto with had more than just restorative properties, though. Not only did Olto deflect the guardian’s attack, but he sent it straight back where it came from.

“R-Raieee!”

The red laser beam hit the beast square in the face, causing it to stumble. Needless to say, Amimin and Mattsun were quick to seize this opportunity. Without missing a beat, Amimin sicced one of her monsters on the guardian.

“Koasa! It’s Double-Edge time!”

Double-Edge was a high-cost skill that cost half of your max HP as well as all of your MP. In exchange, the next blow you dealt would more than triple in power. As the name implied, it was pretty much a last resort. Double-Edge was also a unique skill; according to the forums, Amimin was the only player confirmed to own a monster possessing it.

“So Koasa’s the one!”

I stared, mouth agape, as Koasa the Doodle-Doo, a monster that looked a lot like a rooster, charged at the boss. He then gave its hard shell a sharp peck with his tiny beak. While it didn’t look like he’d done any significant damage, the attack produced a thunderous sound, and the boss was immediately thrown off-balance. Though Koasa had

succeeded in reducing a huge chunk of its HP, it wasn't enough to finish it off completely. However, Amimin wasn't done yet.

"Return, Koasa! Come forth, Yasuke!"

As soon as she uttered her command, Koasa disappeared in a flash of light, and a giant rhinoceros beetle appeared in his place.

"Yasuke! Horn Attack!"

Hiss!

Yasuke the beetle performed a follow-up attack, stabbing the boss with his horn. That still wasn't enough to kill it, but the impact caused the creature to trip and crash into the ground. All we had to do now was launch an all-out attack. The ogre Mattsun summoned was particularly impressive, looking every bit as menacing as the boss. Its grisly appearance wasn't just for show either; using its gigantic hammer, it dealt the finishing blow to the beast. Over ten meters long, the hammer left a crater in the ground as it struck. The impact felt like a mini earthquake.

"Gnaaarrr..."

The Earth Elementals' Guardian turned into particles of light before fading into thin air.

"Phew, that was close." I breathed out a sigh of relief. If it hadn't been for Amimin and Mattsun, I'd be long dead by now.

"Good job, guys. Thanks for assisting us."

"Maybe I'll look for a bard-type monster too."

It was a relief to know we'd been able to contribute somewhat to the team. After all, there was nothing more despicable than winning a boss fight by leeching off strong players. I might have come close to doing that, though... *Nuh-uh, I'll be sure to make myself more useful next time—or resolve to do so at the very least!* Besides, while I might have been useless, Olto and Sakura had surely proved themselves more than worthy.

"Speaking of fighting, what was that move you did back there, Sakura?" I asked. I didn't recall her having a skill like that. "Wait a minute. Was *that* your Divine Blessing?"

"...!"

Bingo. That solved the mystery of her new skill. Based on what I'd seen earlier, it seemed like Divine Blessing had the power to heal its target and give them a significant stat buff. So, why was it that she could use it at *that* specific moment but not other times? It had to be a matter of some sort of prerequisite being fulfilled, but I wasn't sure what.

After exchanging ideas with Amimin, we came to the conclusion that Divine Blessing probably only became available to use when the user's party found themselves in a precarious situation. "Precarious" was a vague way to put it, but presumably it applied to cases like the

party's overall HP dipping below a certain threshold or a team member facing the brink of death. That checked out: we had been on our last legs when Sakura came to our aid, not to mention Olto's death had been almost a certainty. Not much was known yet about this rare skill, however, so I'd probably have to see it in action a few more times to grasp its full potential. For now, it was time to check out what we had won from the boss battle.

"Let's see what the guardian dropped."

The three of us proceeded to check what we'd reaped from our fight with the Earth Elementals' Guardian.

"Shells, huh? Could be useful for armor, I guess. Doubt any of these'll make good ingredients for my smokes, though..." Mattsun muttered.

"Look, I got its tongue!" Amimin announced.

I had gotten the following items: an Earth Guardian Beast's Shell, Earth Guardian Beast's Fur, and Earth Guardian Beast's Claws. They would probably make decent weapons or armor components, although they seemed more suitable for Bear Bear or Rick than for use in my own equipment. *Guess that makes its tongue a rare drop, then.* However, something unexpected happened to cast doubt on my thoughts.

"Hot damn. We got an earth crystal." Mattsun whistled in wonder.

"No way. Really?" Amimin's eyes widened.

"For real. Check this out."

To our surprise, the Earth Elementals' Guardian's drops seemed to include earth crystals. Was *that* its rare drop then? It couldn't be, though—that had to be its tongue. If earth crystals were, in fact, regular drops, this could signal the start of an all-out boss hunt. Frankly, I didn't want to fight anymore, but Amimin and Mattsun seemed to be toying with the idea of grinding the dungeon.

"Grinding aside, what do you wanna do next?"

"Hmm, good question. Considering that thing was a mini-boss..."

Yep, you heard right. As Amimin said, the Earth Elementals' Guardian hadn't been the final boss. Even though we'd barely escaped with our lives, this wasn't the end of it—more powerful monsters awaited us farther ahead. As a matter of fact, a new path had emerged opposite the entrance we came in from, giving off an air of sinister invitation.

"A mini-boss, eh...? This dungeon's way tougher than it looks," Mattsun muttered. According to her, the boss we'd just fought had been comparable in strength to the field boss in Zone Four. If the mini-boss was already that strong, I could only imagine how ridiculously powerful the final boss had to be. At any rate, it was obvious my team wouldn't stand a chance.

"By the way, Amimin." I turned to her, remembering something

that had roused my curiosity during the fight. “Was that some kind of skill you used to swap out your monsters?”

“Not exactly. I used this,” she replied, taking off her necklace to show me.

“Whoa...a Tamed Monster’s Orb.”

“Mhm.”

I’d heard rumors about these, but this was my first time actually seeing one. A tamed monster’s orb—aka summoning bead—was considered an essential item for Tamers, as it enabled you to summon one of your standby monsters from your home or ranch. If your party was already full, you could swap them out with a monster of your choice instead. I’d always thought it was an item mainly for swapping weakened monsters with ones in better condition, but Amimin took things one step further. I would never have thought of using it to coordinate my monsters’ special attacks. *What a genius move.* While tamed monsters’ orbs had a cooldown time, it was possible to own more than one of them at a time.

“Does that mean if you own lots of orbs, you can swap out as many monsters as you like?” I asked Amimin.

“It would be great if you could, but sadly, that’s not possible.”

Evidently, you couldn’t just use a tamed monster’s orb whenever you felt like it. Amimin showed me hers again, which was embedded in a necklace that had poison resistance. To use a tamed monster’s orb, you had to embed it in one of your equipment’s empty slots. The number of available slots differed from item to item and were also used to strengthen them. Basically, what that meant was that if you wanted to use multiple orbs, you had to wear a piece of equipment that had as many slots available for them as you had orbs. The downside was that there was no telling how sturdy such an item would be, and you’d also have to abandon the possibility of enhancing the gear if you wanted to preserve your slots for other things. While removing those orbs later was possible, it wasn’t something you could just do on a whim since it had to be done by a blacksmith.

Additionally, there was the question of whether it was even possible to create that many tamed monster’s orbs in the first place; making one required a tamed monster’s heart. I couldn’t make an orb yet since my guild rank wasn’t high enough, but I would be able to the next time I ranked up. I could hardly wait now that I’d learned this item’s full potential.

“Hey, Mattsun, about that ogreish monster you summoned at the end... That was an Instant Summon, right? Wouldn’t it have been easier to summon it permanently from the start?”

Another thing I’d been curious about was Mattsun’s summoning abilities. The ogre she’d summoned had been incredibly strong, and it

had landed the final blow for us. Perma-Summon was a method of summoning a monster as a party member for an extended period of time. Instant Summon, by contrast, was a method of summoning monsters for just one turn to use their special skill. I'd heard that perma-summons drained the user's MP and cost a lot to maintain, so you had to choose when to use them wisely. Even so, I figured it would've been worth the risk to summon that monster from the start if it meant winning the fight sooner. As it turned out, however, that was easier said than done.

The creature Mattsun had summoned was called a Herculean Ogre, an unusual specimen born from a failed Monster Synthesis experiment. As the name suggested, Monster Synthesis was a Summoner-specific system that allowed players to synthesize their monsters and create new breeds. Unfortunately, accidents sometimes occurred, resulting in rare instances of monsters deviating from the standard. Incidents that gave birth to monsters well outside the normal range were referred to as anomalous cases—the rarest of the rare. As a result, only a few cases had been confirmed so far. Mattsun's Herculean Ogre was one such example; a monster that powerful wasn't supposed to appear until much later in the game. Given how strong it was, it demanded nearly half of Mattsun's max HP just to summon as an instant summon at her current level, despite instant summons typically only requiring one-tenth the cost of perma-summons.

"As you can see, it's a demanding son of a gun. Who knows when I'll be able to perma-summon it?" She shrugged. Regardless, I envied both her and Amimin for having a trump card. I really hoped I'd get a cool ability someday too—not that it was something you could obtain just by hoping for it.

"But surely one day...!" I vowed to myself, trying to be optimistic. In the meantime, Amimin seemed to have finished checking her monsters' level-ups.

"So, what do you guys wanna do next? Frankly, I'm pretty spent, so I'm probably going to have to quit real soon."

"Same. Plus, it looks like the monsters are only gonna get more powerful from here on out," I agreed.

"Me three." Mattsun nodded.

"Then how about we just have a quick look around the next room and head back?" Amimin suggested.

"Sounds good to me."

"Agreed."

Although I tried to sound confident, it wasn't as if I actually had a say in what they decided. To tell the truth, I was desperate to get out of here; exploring more rooms was the last thing I wanted to do. Even

though traveling with two high-ranking players meant less work for me, it also made me feel pretty self-conscious about my behavior. I didn't mind playing like this once in a while, but I didn't think I could do this regularly; playing solo suited me much better. That didn't mean I disliked adventuring with them, though—quite the contrary. However, I could tell how awkward I was around Amimin. But honestly, I was sure anyone would be nervous if their idol suddenly appeared before them and invited them along on a quest.

“Okey-dokey then. To the next room!” Amimin chirped.

“Hold your horses, girl. Gotta be more careful—no telling what's in there. You do have a tendency to fall for weird traps and die unexpectedly.”

“Y-You don't have to remind me, Mattsun. I *know*.”

“Do you?”

Eventually, Mattsun took over and led the way down the new path that had appeared after the boss fight.

“Looks more or less the same... Oh, but there seem to be more monsters in here than in the other rooms. Could be higher level too,” Amimin said, peering inside.

“I don't think we should risk it then,” I said.

“Silver-Haired's right,” Mattsun agreed. “Best not take any chances. Let's get outta here.”

“Okay.”

With the help of an escape orb, we left the dungeon and returned to the Earth Elementals' town posthaste.

“We made it!”

“Sure did. Guess we can finally take a breather now.”

“Please get some rest, you two.”

“Will do. Thanks for everything, Yuto.”

“Likewise. I could never have defeated the mini-boss on my own, so thanks for being there.”

“Honestly, we couldn't have done it without you either. We owe you one, Silver-Haired. Let's keep in touch.”

Amimin and Mattsun planned on bringing the materials they got to a blacksmith they were acquainted with after they left town, though Mattsun had decided to sell her earth crystal to one of her friends. They asked me if I was fine with that; obviously, I had no objections. We had agreed that what we'd obtained on our own was ours to keep, so naturally that crystal rightfully belonged to Mattsun.

“We'll be going now. See you around.”

“Bye!”

What a fruitful expedition that had been! Not only had I become friends with Amimin, but I'd also got to defeat the dungeon's mini-boss, evolve Olto, and witness Sakura's Divine Blessing in action. I was

positively stoked.

“Now then. What do you say we stock up on potions and go another round in the dungeon?”

“Mm!”

“Still going strong, aren’t you?”

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

Despite everything we’d gone through, Olto was as energetic as ever, hoe slung over his shoulder confidently. Despite her calm demeanor, Sakura’s fervent gaze gave away her similar eagerness to fight.

“Growl growl!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Hum-hum!”

“Aye!”

The same could be said for my other companions too. If anything, they were more aggressive now, since Olto and Sakura had practically stolen the show. Each of them seemed keen for me to notice them, expressing their determination by shadowboxing or posing.

“That’s what I like to hear! All right, time for another dungeon dive! We’re going the whole nine yards today!”

Unfortunately, my enthusiasm would soon come back to bite me in the ass. In addition to being overly hyped up, spending time with Amimin and Mattsun had skewed my perspective on things. As a result, I wholly miscalculated when to call it quits. In my defense, however, we *had* been making great progress at first, no doubt thanks to my blue wood staff and powered-up monsters. That had foolishly led to overconfidence on my part. Instead of turning back, I’d decided to go farther and explore just one more room, where I fell into not one, but *three* Deranged Earth Elementals’ pitfalls. If it hadn’t been for my flee orb, I would have died right there and then.

After that incident, I reverted to my usual approach, tiptoeing through the dungeon like the wimp I was. Yep, noobs like me who were inexperienced at grinding were better off erring on the side of caution. Lesson learned. *Why hurry when you can stop to smell the roses?* I took slowing down to heart, even stopping to have tea on the way. After exploring the dungeon in that manner for some time, something unexpected happened.

“Growl growl.”

“Whoa. Does this mean I maxed out your favorability score?”

We were on our third or fourth break, and I’d given Bear Bear some honey juice as a treat. Right after they downed it, I received a tamed monster’s heart in return. I was thrilled, not only from a pragmatic standpoint, but because it was proof that Bear Bear liked

me. Currently, Bear Bear was at level 24, having leveled up from our previous mini-boss fight. If Honey Bears shared the same conditions as gnomes, it was highly likely that they would be able to evolve on their next level-up. Since Bear Bear was a nonunique specimen, I'd been worried that my options would be severely limited. While there was nothing wrong with a normal evolution, I'd choose a special evolution over it any day if I had the choice.

Since there was no unique option for Bear Bear, the max favorability score evolution had been my prime candidate. I'd almost given up hope as I hadn't received their tamed monster's heart until now, though. Thank goodness for taking my time! All those extra snacks had definitely paid off.

"Wonder what kind of options you have, Bear Bear?"

"Growl?"

"I'd rather you stay cute, but I wouldn't mind something a little more intimidating either. Which do you prefer?"

As much as I loved the teddy-bear look, I was equally intrigued to see Bear Bear take on a fiercer, more realistic appearance—especially one that actually roared rather than cutely growling.

"Growl growl?"

"Guess you can't really tell yourself."

"Growl."

Several hours later, during a merciless killing spree, the stars aligned for us, and Bear Bear leveled up again. The timing couldn't have been better.

"Growl growl growl!"

"I knew it! Twenty-five is your turning point too, huh?"

Once Bear Bear reached level 25, I received an announcement similar to Olto's.

"Let's see... Looks like we got two choices."

The number of evolution options differed from monster to monster. While Olto and Rick had two normal evolutions to choose from, Bear Bear only had one, similar to Sakura.

"I'm guessing this is the normal option. Hmm. A *Bugbear*? What's that?"

If I remembered correctly, Bugbears weren't bears at all, despite having the word "bear" in their name. They were actually a type of hobgoblin that resembled a namahage in appearance. They sometimes did look bearlike depending on the story, though. In any case, they seemed to be categorized as a type of bear in this game.

Stat-wise, their Strength got the biggest boost, followed by Endurance. In terms of abilities, they gained advanced Claw Attack skills, plus Super Gluttony, the upgraded version of Gluttony.

Additionally, they learned a new ability called Follow-Up when evolving, which gave them a slight chance of dealing extra damage when attacking their opponent. With Bugbears, the main focus seemed to be on increasing firepower. *Now for the other option...*

“A Royal Honey Bear?”

Royal Honey Bears received a boost in Endurance and Dexterity, and their skills sounded pretty intriguing too. Like Bugbears, Royal Honey Bears also gained advanced Claw Attack skills, but instead of Gluttony, it was their Beekeeping skills that got an upgrade. In addition, they also acquired a new skill called Insect Attractant, which had a slight chance of attracting insect-type monsters as well as befriending ordinary insects. Choosing this option would result in a bear that specialized in beekeeping.

“Not gonna lie, this is kinda hard...”

If I could harvest better-quality honey, my cooking would likely improve. Besides, Bugbears sounded kind of scary. I wouldn't mind if Bear Bear became more realistic, but if they were to transform into a hobgoblin or namahage as Bugbear lore implied... If I was being perfectly honest, I wasn't confident I'd be able to love them the same way as before. *Better to choose the safer option than risk ruining my beloved companion's cute looks.*

“All right, let's go with Royal Honey Bear!”

“Growl!”

Special evolution, here we come!

Name: Bear Bear / Race: Royal Honey Bear / Base

Level: Lv. 25

Master: Yuto

HP: 89/89 / MP: 68/68

Strength: 23 / Endurance: 19 / Agility: 14

Dexterity: 18 / Intelligence: 13 / Sanity: 14

Skills: Cuteness, Gluttony, Smelling, Cultivation, Claw Attack (Advanced), Climb, Poison Resistance, Sweet Scent, Beekeeping (Advanced), Charge Ramp-Up, Insect Attractant

Equipment: None

For the most part, Bear Bear remained unchanged: the yellow fur and cute, cuddly appearance stayed the same. However, they had grown a lot bigger. At almost 160 centimeters tall, they were now taller than me.



Moreover, they seemed to have outgrown their clothes, as all of their equipment had been removed and returned to my inventory. That was something I hadn't anticipated. I'd have to buy new ones for them as soon as possible.

"Eh, just as well, I guess. Was thinking of calling it a day soon anyway."

By now, I was starting to get sick of the dungeon, having gone round and round it eight times already. Come to think of it, this was the first time I'd gone farming in the same dungeon, and I sure wasn't keen on doing it again for a while. Thankfully, there only seemed to be one Deranged Earth Elemental in the next room, so I decided to leave the place after testing Bear Bear's new abilities.

"Get 'em, buddy."

"Growl growl!"

Bear Bear ran headfirst at the creature, claws glinting menacingly. As expected, evolving had made them much stronger. I wouldn't go so far as to say their attack power had doubled, but it had definitely increased by at least fifty percent. Without their equipment bonus, their strength was more or less the same, meaning the boost in power was due to their claw skills becoming more advanced. I felt like their knockback and critical hit rates had improved too.

"Gonna be way easier to explore dungeons and stuff now."

"Growl growl!"

Bear Bear flexed their nonexistent teddy-bear biceps and flashed me a smug grin. I felt both comforted by the reassurance and excited about Reflet and Fau's eventual evolutions. No doubt they would grow into powerful allies too. When we returned to the Earth Elementals' town, I could tell there were far more players on the streets than before, the air practically buzzing with all the activity.

"Damn. They just keep coming, don't they?"

Interestingly, the crowd seemed to grow larger each time we visited town. This was thanks to the Quick-Eared Cats and Tamers like Amelia steadily obtaining earth crystals and selling them to their friends in need.

"For now, let's just sort the items we got."

I'd been keeping track of my drops and stuff until a certain point, but it had become too much of a chore after a while. Besides, even if I got a rare item, it wasn't like I could sell it to someone right away. It just seemed much easier to check everything all at once when I was done farming instead. Once I'd found a suitable bench in the corner of the square, I plonked myself down on it and opened my inventory.

"You guys can play while you wait."

"Mm-mm!"

“La di da...♪”

Apparently, my companions had decided to dance. Forming a circle around Fau, they began doing some sort of Bon dance, moving in time to the lute’s rhythm. I guessed some things never changed, regardless of whether they evolved. *Talk about distracting, though... Oh well.*

“Same old, same old... No, wait! Holy shit!” My jaw dropped at what I’d found. I had not one, but *two* earth crystals in my inventory! After reviewing my logs, I learned that I’d obtained one from a Deranged Earth Elemental; the other one had been dug up by Olto. Was this the power of advanced Mining skills?

“What should I do with them...?”

Should I sell them to Alyssa? On second thought, it was probably better to check if any of my friends wanted one first. Earth Day would be over soon. If someone wanted to enter the gate but couldn’t because they didn’t own a crystal, I’d be more than happy to let them have mine.

“Okay, time to make a few calls. Let’s start with Ashihana.”

Online Forum [Gather 'Round Tamers, Part 13] LJO Tamer Megathread

Share the deets on new tamed monsters, show off your companions, etc.—this thread is for everyone!

Bad-mouthing other Tamers is not permitted.

Screenshots gladly accepted.

Avoid double-posting.

Be mindful of what you post.

664: Ivan

Man, all I've been hearing lately is gnomes this and gnomes that.

Can't believe how many Tamers have been getting gnomes.

665: KingOysterMushroom

Well, I haven't gotten one. Mostly because I don't plan on owning a farm, among other reasons.

666: Ursula

Not sure if I'm getting a farm either, but I still got one for cuddles and kisses!

So come on, love! Join the party!

667: KingOysterMushroom

ROFL I'd be a total creep if I got a gnome solely for that purpose, especially since I'm a dude. Besides, I can't bring myself to use up a slot for a monster that can't even fight.

I do wanna know how many Tamers have tamed gnomes so far, though. As in like, the overall percentage.

668: Ivan

Well, all the full-time Tamers I'm friends with have gotten one.

I'd say the taming rate's around sixty percent since there are probably people like you who aren't interested in farming or only want fighters on their

team.

669: KingOysterMushroom

Gotcha. Guess there's no reason to tame one if I don't want to, then.

670: Ivan

Even if you did, Earth Day will be over in less than an hour. Can you even enter the Earth Elemental Gate?

671: KingOysterMushroom

Not a problem. I was grinding there earlier. Every Tamer I met had a gnome with them, though, which kinda got me thinking. I even met one who had three XD

What the hell is Amelia gonna do with that many gnomes?

672: Ursula

No need to force yourself. Takes a long time for gnomes to become useful in combat, after all.

673: KingOysterMushroom

Wait, what? Did someone discover they gain fighting abilities when they evolve?

674: Ivan

Silver-Haired mentioned he was gonna sell his info to the Quick-Eared Cats, so you can probably find out more from them if you're curious.

I happened to see his evolved gnome in person btw. As you can imagine, he ended up choosing an evolution type with zero offensive skills XDD

675: Ursula

LMAO same old Silver-Haired as usual, huh?

676: KingOysterMushroom

That's what makes him him lol

677: Amelia

Guys, you won't believe this! Olto's gotten a HUGE upgrade!

678: Ivan

Speak of the devil

679: Amelia

Other than his slightly fancier outfit, he looks pretty much the same though!

Seriously, how much cuter can he get?!

680: KingOysterMushroom

Bet people are gonna go nuts again.

You know, I might actually reconsider if gnomes stand a chance in a fight.

Mage-like monsters who can use earth magic are pretty valuable IMO.

681: Eulenspiegel

Huzzah! My Gray Squirrel evolved!

682: Amelia

Is that the squirrel you said you wouldn't evolve until you got its tamed monster's heart?

683: Eulenspiegel

Yep. Took me until level 25 because of that.

Was totally worth the wait, though!

684: Ursula

I take it something cool happened?

685: Eulenspiegel

Damn right! I decided to go with Silver Ash Squirrel, and they gained healing abilities! Can't get enough of their lush silver fur either. Oh yeah, they also learned Cloning at level 25.

686: KingOysterMushroom

Cloning? Haven't heard that one before.

687: Eulenspiegel

The name pretty much says it. Basically, it allows the user to produce clones and improve their evasion and hit rate.

It also increases your chances of getting in a critical hit, or so I've heard.

Overall, pretty dang useful to have.

688: Amelia

That *is* pretty amazing.

Might become standard to wait until level 25 to evolve squirrels from now on!

689: Ivan

I'm surprised you even got a tamed monster's heart in the first place.

IIRC, no one else has gotten one from a squirrel yet.

690: Eulenspiegel

NGL, it took a *lot* of work. Asked them to pick their favorites out of a bunch of food and tried feeding them all kinds of stuff every day.

Eventually, I found out squirrels are mad about glowing walnuts.

Managed to get my tamed monster's heart after feeding them one a second time.

691: Ursula

That's good to know. Hmm, glowing walnuts, huh... Guess it's worth holding out for the Cloning skill, though. Maybe I'll try taming another squirrel too.

692: Ivan

BTW, Eulen. Is it true you encountered a tree nymph?

693: Eulenspiegel

Yep! Ran into one by chance in the forest up north.

694: Amelia

OMG what?! No fair! I want a tree nymph too!

695: Eulenspiegel

I didn't get it, though—the other Tamer I was with tamed it first! DAMN THEM!

696: Ivan

Ah, right.

697: Eulenspiegel

We decided to tame it together. No matter who got it, we promised there'd be no hard feelings between us. Sadge...

Curse that bastard! If only this game allowed PVP...

698: KingOysterMushroom

What happened to the whole "no hard feelings" part?

699: Ursula

You're *really* upset about this, aren't you lolol

700: Amelia

Well, you know what they say—the more you seek something, the less likely you are to get it.

701: Ivan

LOL I think the game hates you, buddy

702: Eulenspiegel

DAMN IT! Why can't it be Water Day already?! I swear

I'm gonna get an undine even if it kills me!

Online Forum [This Dungeon Ain't No Joke] Let's Discuss the Earth Elementals' Trial

More a space to rant than to exchange gaming tips.

New info is always welcome.

Beware: the death toll is high in this one.

771: **Salvia**

In other words, no one can get the final door to open.

772: **Shinohara**

Some people hypothesized offering an earth crystal, but that didn't work either.

773: **Subarun**

But we already pay one just to enter the gate. Why should we have to sacrifice *another* one just for the boss room? Those things don't come cheap, y'know.

774: **Cedric**

Actually, it seems like earth crystals aren't as hard to obtain as we once thought.

No way these many players would be able to gain entrance otherwise.

775: **Subarun**

They're not?

776: **Cedric**

You can either:

- Get them from mini-boss drops
- Mine for them using advanced Mining skills (very low probability)
- Get them from a Deranged Earth Elemental (low probability)
- Get them from a unique Deranged Earth Elemental (guaranteed)

The easiest would be to get them from a mini-boss. Apparently, they have a 70% drop rate per party.

777: Subarun

That *is* pretty high. Okay, I'll do my best!

778: Shinohara

I say the key lies in the narrow secret passage.

779: Subarun

It's really hard to get in there, though.
I had to stoop all the way, only to end up activating a trap and dying.

780: Salvia

It's already so narrow, and you're telling me there are *traps* in there? What kinda effed-up situation is that?

781: Subarun

Got poisoned by Dark Bats, so ran into the passage to get away from them.
Got stuck in there and died. FML

782: Shinohara

Er, you sure that's a trap?

783: Sawyer

Good news, friends.
I've discovered a gnome rental service!

784: Salvia

A *what*? Details, please!

785: Sawyer

Just saw the Quick-Eared Cats post this to their website.
Apparently, players who made it to the boss room can hire a helper gnome in town.

786: Salvia

So *that's* why those players have been stocking up like crazy on weapons in the Northern Town!
They've been using them to bulldoze their way through the dungeon!

787: Subarun

D-Does that mean I won't have to be jealous of Tamers or feel bad about myself anymore...?
I no longer need to fear being reported for accidentally getting too close to Silver-Haired's

gnome?

Two's company, but five gnomes = gnome heaven

788: Sawyer

Hate to burst your bubble, but you can only have one gnome per party.

You can't bring them out of the dungeon either.

If you like, you can rent one for 1,000 G for 24 hours.

Oh, one more thing—they can't fight.

789: Subarun

Doesn't matter, as long as I can hire a gnome! Imma head to the dungeon RIGHT now!

790: Cedric

You'll probably wanna hear this next bit then lulz
The Quick-Eared Cats literally just updated their
dungeon map.

It's pretty detailed, so you'll probably make good
progress, especially if you have a helper gnome.

791: Subarun

Oh my. *gulp* Must be expensive, though.

792: Cedric

Not at all. If you call now, you can get it for the
low, low price of only 10,000 G. What do you say?

793: Subarun

Now *that's* what I call a bargain! Sold!

794: Shinohara

The heck is this farce ROFL

795: Salvia

asjgshdf you guys undercover Cat shills or
something?

796: Cedric

Not me. I'm innocent.

797: Subarun

Me too!

798: Sawyer

Me three

799: Cedric

Bull. You guys are too in sync. Bet you're all in on
it!

Online Forum [Assemble, Fans of Silver-Haired] All Things Silver-Haired-Related, Pt. 4

This thread is for people who are interested in Silver-Haired, the famously eccentric pioneer, and his monsters. Feel free to exchange information about them here.

Slander or abuse will not be tolerated.

Please treat sensitive information with care.

This thread may be deleted without warning should we receive a complaint from Silver-Haired himself.

389: Yang Yang

Here's a list of all the stunts Silver-Haired pulled after the event:

[*] Got a pixie and shared her sweet singing voice with us.

[*] Unlocked the Water Elemental Gate and consequently made undines available.

[*] Sold some mysterious materials to Shuella, resulting in an uproar. Later confirmed to be items from the Water Elemental Gate.

[*] Unlocked the Earth Elemental Gate and consequently made gnomes available.

Well, guys, that's Silver-Haired for you...

Honestly, I don't even know what to say anymore LMAO

390: visitorfromanotherplanet

Sheesh

Man's a total wild card

391: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Tamers have been tearing around in total panic, trying to get their hands on water and earth crystals. Sadly, most of them seem to come up empty-handed.

If I didn't know what pandemonium was before, I sure do now.

392: Willow

You should've seen the line at the Quick-Eared Cats. Don't blame them, though. Who wouldn't want to know how to find a gnome or undine...?

393: Yang Yang

Didn't take long for the crystals' prices to skyrocket either.

I regret not saving mine now...

394: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Got lucky and managed to sell mine for a really good price!

If only I could use this money to buy a water crystal, though...

There are so few of them on the market I can't even try negotiating even if I wanted to.

395: visitorfromanotherplanet

You still have time, don't you? The Water Elemental Gate won't open again until next week.

Never mind that—let's worry about the *Earth* Elemental Gate. Gotta get an earth crystal by the end of today somehow!

396: Yang Yang

Well, the Cats have been farming hard to increase their supply, and other players are actively selling their earth crystals too.

You might get lucky if you have connections with the Cats or their affiliates.

397: visitorfromanotherplanet

Ooh, didn't think of that!

398: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Can't believe Silver-Haired sold this info so quickly, though...

If I were him, I would've kept it to myself for a week or so to rake in the big bucks.

399: visitorfromanotherplanet

Heard info on the Earth Elemental Gate went on sale around 4 a.m., so I imagine it was right after he discovered it.

400: Willow

For real, dude! I would've kept it a secret too. TBH, wouldn't *most* people?

401: Yang Yang

Well, this is Silver-Haired we're talking about.

402: visitorfromanotherplanet

That always sums it up, doesn't it

403: Willow

Bet the players who found the Fire Elemental Gate are suuuper upset now the cat's out of the bag

404: Yodel-Ay-Hee

I can imagine. No doubt that gate will be unlocked next week too.

405: visitorfromanotherplanet

Think Silver-Haired's gonna be okay?

I know PKing isn't allowed in this game, but they might still try to harass him if they have a grudge.

406: Yang Yang

Can't rule that out completely, but...

There are loads of Silver-Haired Defenders on the lookout, so he should be fine.

407: Willow

What's that? Some kinda secret society?

408: Yang Yang

Strictly speaking, it's not an actual organization, but the name of his fan base.

They have three main activities, namely:

1. Watch over Silver-Haired from afar.
2. Report any player harassing him to the devs.
3. Give him their daily thanks.

409: Willow

Gotcha. So they're basically a fan club.

410: Yang Yang

Well, it's a little broader than that—you can basically start calling yourself a Defender anytime. The only criteria are to be grateful for Silver-Haired's contributions and not bother him.

411: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Oh, I get it now!

Thank you, Silver-Haired!

Even if I can never imitate what you do!

412: Willow

You're not alone. No one can copy Silver-Haired.
But thanks, dude! We all appreciate what you do!

413: Yang Yang

Guess the best we can do is thank him and watch out
for him from a distance.

414: visitorfromanotherplanet

I should take a moment to express my gratitude too!
Thanks, Silver-Haired!

May you continue to grace us with your presence!
I'll make sure no harm ever comes to you!

415: Willow

Wait a min. Give him thanks and watch over him...
Isn't that basically what we're doing?
Doesn't that make *us* Defenders too?

416: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Yang Yang! Don't tell me you're...?

Epilogue

“What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost or something.”

“Oh, hey, Chief... Take a look at this. It’s about you-know-who...”

“Ah, Silver-Haired? What did he do this t— Holy smokes! You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“I wish I was. He’s already unlocked *two* of the Elemental Gates.”

“Damn. I thought it was pretty impressive when those guys found the Fire Elemental Gate, but I should’ve known Silver-Haired would catch up to them soon.”

“We worked so hard to plant subtle hints so players would find the gates in the long run. Not sure how to feel about his finding them so quickly without any assistance, although I guess I should be happy about it.”

“Hmm... If my memory serves me right, he has connections with the information brokers, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. Won’t be long before news of the Elemental Gates spreads like wildfire.”

“I see. Well, lots of Tamers were hounding us to disclose info about gnomes, so this ought to put a stop to their complaints. Maybe it was just as well that he discovered them so soon.”

“You know, that’s a good point. They were pretty intimidating, especially those gnome hunters.”

“Well? Anything else?”

“You don’t have to look *that* excited, Chief. He’s already made way more untimely discoveries than anyone else. Surely he can’t have — Nope, I was wrong!”

“The special evolution route for tree nymphs?! Already?! Well done!”

“*Well done?! This is ridiculous! What the hell? How...? Do you have any idea how many conditions you need to fulfill to unlock this route?! This is supposed to be like a bonus option, purely for fun. It should’ve taken him *months* to discover this route, and only after collecting enough hints at the library or through events...*”

“What were the requirements again? You need to propagate the Sequoia Dryad’s lakeside sequoia fruit, grow it until a certain stage within a specific time period, then cure its phytoplasma disease, right?”

“Yes, but that’s not all. Your tree nymph has to have bred with

another monster, laid and hatched an egg, and given you its tamed monster's heart *before* you bring them to meet the Sequoia Dryad to receive her blessing."

"Imagine that. And yet, he unlocked the Mother Tree Fae route without any hints... What an absolute madlad!"

"How the hell does he do it? I don't get it at all. I know it's not a bug, and he's definitely not cheating, but still..."

"I know! He must be from another world. Bet you anything he's an ex-adventurer who defeated the evil overlord before returning to Earth to live a more quiet life. *That's* why he has cheat powers, like the ability to derail cause and effect!"

"...Seriously? An isekai-reincarnation-slash-VRMMO setting? I feel like that's overdoing it."

"Hmm... True. Let's have a drink."

"Wait, what? I fail to see the connection. You just want an excuse to drink, don't you?!"

"Idiot! How can I NOT drink after seeing all that?! This calls for a toast!"

"Oh, you meant a *celebratory* drink—not to drown your sorrows!"

"Ha ha ha! Cheers to Silver-Haired!"

Afterword

Greetings, everyone. I'm Yuu Tanaka, the author of this series. Some of you may have seen my numerous posts about padding the number of pages in my books so I don't have to write an afterword (I'm terrible at them), yet here I am, writing one.

Getting the number of pages just right is quite tricky, isn't it? I know authors who manage to nail it every time, though. If you're reading this, I would love to know your secrets.

Maybe next time, I won't write anything at all and just make the protagonist's monsters have a roundtable talk instead. ...On second thought, that wouldn't work, would it...? None of the monsters in this story are capable of human speech, after all.

Fortunately, I was able to deliver Volume 4 not too long after the previous volume. This volume's publication also happens to coincide with the launch of the tie-in manga for the series, so I'd be happy if you checked that out too.

This year was a rather eventful one: I experienced a loss in the family and fell ill myself, among other things. I received many kind messages from people during these times, though. I have no doubt that I would be in a much darker place without everyone's encouragement, and my work and personal life would have suffered greatly. Thanks to you all, I was able to remain strong and bounce back. For that, I have nothing but endless gratitude.

Lastly, I'd like to thank a few people.

First, my editor, I-san, for always giving me apt advice—my sincerest apologies for submitting my manuscript so close to the deadline. I wish I could guarantee the next one will be delivered earlier, but in any case, I look forward to continuing working with you. Thank you for putting up with me.

Nardack, thank you for your super adorable illustrations. I can't handle how cute the drawing of Fau riding on Rick's back is.

Tachibana, thank you for working on the manga adaptation. I enjoy reading it and seeing how it differs from the original novels. Also, how adorable is Olto?! I honestly can't stop swooning.

To my friends and family back home, thank you for supporting me when times were tough. You have no idea how much I appreciate you.

I'm also wholly grateful for all the people who worked behind the scenes to make this book a reality. No volume is ever complete without your hard work.

And of course, thank you to my readers for reading and supporting this series—you give me the strength to keep writing. Thank you for your continued generosity, and I hope to see you again in the next volume.

Thank you so much for reading until the end.

A Late-Start Tamer's
Laid-Back Life

A
LATE-
START

TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE

4





"La la la
la...♪"

Once she was done eating, Fau brought her hands together and gave a little bow as if to thank me for the food. She then began plucking the strings on her lute, evidently in high spirits.

Was she trying to convey how delectable her meal had been through music? I found her voice incredibly soothing.

Bonus Short Story

The Gang Go on a Walk

“Mm-mm!”

“D’aah! What’s up, buddy?”

I’d just finished weeding my last patch when Olto suddenly hurled himself at me from behind. He seemed to be bored now that he was done with his chores.

“Easy with the flying tackle there, okay...?” I said, wincing.

“Mm?”

Oh well. Olto’s enthusiasm *was* one of his best traits.

“Let me guess. You want me to play with you?”

“Mm!”

“Growl growl!”

“Bear Bear?! Wh-When did *you* get here...?” I sputtered, surprised by their sudden appearance beside Olto. Evidently, the word “play” had caught their attention.

“...♪”

“Chirp chirp.”

“Whoa! You guys too?!”

Even Sakura and Rick had sneaked up on me unawares. They all seemed thrilled at the prospect of fun, beaming at me in anticipation.

“Well, we do have a bit of free time now. Since y’all are so keen, shall we go for a little walk?”

“Mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl!”

“...♪”

My monsters cheered in unison, happiness radiating from their faces. If something as simple as a walk made them this happy, it was well worth the trip.

“I gotta go see Alyssa afterwards, so it’ll probably be a pretty short walk. You guys okay with that?”

“Mm-mm!” Olto saluted in reply to show that everyone understood.

“Good. All righty, where to then?”

“Mmm? Mm-mm.”

“Growl?”

“Chirp?”

Olto, Bear Bear, and Rick looked at each other before leaning in to discuss their plans. They each appeared to have something specific in mind.

“What about you, Sakura? Don’t you wanna join them?” I asked her. She had opted to hang back from the discussion.

“...”

In response, she just gave me a slight smile and shook her head. *Good ol’ Sakura.* Ever the big sister, she seemed fine going along with whatever her siblings decided.

“Mm-mm? Mm! Mm-mm!”

“Growl growl! Groooowl?”

“Chirrrp chirp! Chirp chirp!”

The remaining three were engaged in a heated discussion, all hands, paws, and tails, even jumping from time to time. Each of them had a serious look on their face, as though they were debating a highly controversial political topic. So intense was their discussion that I could almost see the sweat dripping down their foreheads. After several minutes, they finally appeared to arrive at a conclusion.

“Mm! Mmm!” Olto signaled, pointing at the main street.

“Now that you mention it, we haven’t really explored that side of town.”

“Mm.”

“Okay, we’ll stroll along the main street today then.”

“Mmm!”

We set off for the streets, Olto taking the lead. Every now and then, he would get distracted by something new, like a clump of weeds growing by the roadside or one of the many stalls populating the square, which sent him dashing about all over the place.

“...♪”

Sakura, in contrast, was her usual calm self, matching her step with mine. Bear Bear and Rick were a few paces ahead, the former lolling like a child who had yet to learn how to skip while the latter clung to their head for dear life. Although the jerky motions made it a rocky ride for Rick, he expertly used his tail to balance himself, determined not to be thrown off. He even seemed to be enjoying himself—perhaps it felt similar to bouncing on a trampoline.

“Growly growl growl...♪” Bear Bear sang out of tune while they skipped. Seeing them in such high spirits put me in a good mood too.

“Having fun, Bear Bear?” I asked in a singsong voice.

“Growl growl♪”

“Someone sure looks happy♪”

“GROWL!”

“Chirp chirp!” Rick chimed in as Bear Bear unleashed a particularly bearlike growl.

“Glad you’re enjoying yourself too, Rick♪”

“Chirp chirp♪”

“Growl growl♪”

Excited beyond measure, Bear Bear jumped even higher. The movement proved too much even for Rick, who was thrown off-balance and slid off Bear Bear’s head. *Eh, squirrels are super agile. He’ll be fine.* Or so I thought...

“Growl!”

“Ch-Chirp!”

Just as Rick twisted his body, catlike, and prepared to land on his feet, Bear Bear swiftly punched him in the head. In truth, they had actually meant to *catch* him, but had failed miserably. The punch then sent Rick flying straight into the back of Olto’s head.

“Mm-mm!”

The impact caused Olto to face-plant into the ground. He glared at the pair as he picked himself up, thoroughly annoyed. Though normally mild-mannered, that collision had clearly made him lose his patience.

“Mm-mmm!”

“Ch-Chirp! Chirp!”

Panicking, Rick pointed desperately at Bear Bear. He seemed to be screaming, *Don’t look at me! I’m innocent!* with every fiber of his being.

“Growl...” Bear Bear whined apologetically, all traces of their usual carefree nature gone. They seemed to know that they had gone too far. *Hmm. Maybe I ought to step in...*

“...!”

Before I could intervene, Sakura stepped forward. She then proceeded to give her siblings an earful, her normally calm demeanor replaced by an alarmingly stern expression. I could scarcely believe this was the same Sakura who was always smiling—the way she was currently glaring at the three of them, hands on hips, reminded me of a hardened old-school stay-at-home mom.

“...!”

“Mm, mm...”

“...!”

“Mm.”

“Chirp.”

“Growl.”

Sakura scolded each of her siblings in turn, starting with Olto and ending with Bear Bear. I had no idea what she was saying, but she appeared to be lecturing them all equally. Once done, she gently took all three of their hands and made them shake on it.

“Mm-mm.”

“Chirp chirp.”

“Growl.”

Olto, Rick, and Bear Bear nodded to each other as if to make a show of acknowledging their shared bond. It was a touching sight, although I supposed it was born out of a desire to assuage Sakura’s anger more than anything else. The three of them kept glancing at her nervously; it was obvious they were seeking her approval.

“...”

Sakura nodded, apparently having forgiven them for their misbehavior. The trio breathed out a sigh of relief and hugged each other, their show of solidarity genuine this time. Judging from the way they had all cowered in fear, none of them dared defy Sakura.

“Gotta say, though...” I started.

“...?”

I paused as Sakura gazed up at me, cocking her head to one side adorably. Though she was back to her usual sweet self, I hadn’t forgotten how terrifying she’d looked just now. I vowed to myself not to get too carried away like the others, lest I incur her wrath.







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A Late-Start Tamer's Laid-Back Life: Volume 4
by Yuu Tanaka

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